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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE CRIMINAL TRUST

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THE CRIMINAL TRUST;

OR,

Nick Carter's Mysterious Client.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

BREASTING A WAVE OF CRIME.

It was perhaps only coincidentally that Nick Carter should have received in the same mail one morning, when he descended to the breakfast-table, letters from the chiefs of police of three different cities, each bearing upon the same subject and each couched in so nearly the same words as the others that the reproduction of one of them will suffice here.

One of the letters came from Philadelphia, one from Boston, and the remaining one from Chicago; and inasmuch as it was the Philadelphia letter which Nick read first, we will give that exactly as it was written.

"My Dear Carter," wrote the director of public safety, who, for the sake of brevity, we call the chief of police, "an epidemic of crime seems to have broken out in this city, and my men, expert as they are, seem inadequate to contend with it. It would appear almost as if there were an organized gang at work here, generaled and directed by some master mind who has foreseen every obstacle he would have to overcome to protect his criminals who are with him; but has accomplished what is still more remarkable in attaining, as it would appear, the entire confidence and perfect obedience of his followers. Crimes are committed with impunity, many of them in broad daylight, and some of them almost under the eyes of pedestrians on the streets, and in each case the criminal has succeeded in making his escape with little or no difficulty, notwithstanding the excellent police service which I believe obtains in this city.

"I will confess to you that I am at my wit's end about the matter, and that I have decided to appeal to you because I am convinced that my own men are so well known to these criminals that they are completely handicapped in every effort they make to arrest them. I believe that detectives from some other city are required to round these fellows up, for there is no doubt that they have every one of my men spotted, and that they know beforehand just how to avoid arrest for the outrages they commit.

"I have communicated with the mayor and with the heads of departments here, and also with many of the councilmen, and it is with their approval that I write this letter asking if you can come over here at your earliest convenience, to communicate with me about the condition of things, and to take charge, if you will do so, of the matter I have outlined."

This letter was signed by the director of public safety of Philadelphia, where there is so much jealousy felt whenever there is any suggestion made of outside assistance in police matters that it is only under the greatest stress of necessity that a plea like the foregoing would be made.

Nick Carter put the letter aside with a smile, and spoke across the table to his first assistant as follows:

"Chick, here is a letter from the director of public safety in Philadelphia. They have got some kind of an epidemic of crime over there that they want us to attend to. I think I will send you over there in my place," and he tossed the letter across the table to Chick to read, while he took up the next one himself. This was the Boston letter, and need not be repeated, as it was in effect almost precisely the same as the one from Philadelphia, although differently stated. The detective knitted his brows over it for a moment, and then passed it across the table to Chick, with the remark:

"You may read this letter when you have finished with the other one," and he took up the Chicago letter. Here again was almost a repetition of the other two.

In each case the writers of the letters expressed themselves as believing that a regular organization was in existence in their city, controlled by some man who was a master at the criminal craft, and stated their belief that detectives from other cities were necessary to run them down, since there was no doubt that all of their own men were known to the criminals.

The detective passed this letter also across the table to his assistant, and waited until Chick had read them all.

Then, just as he was about to ask his assistant for an expression of opinion about them, the door-bell rang, and Joseph entered the room, announcing:

"The commissioner of police to see you, Mr. Carter."

"All right, Joseph, take him to the library, and say I will be there in a moment," and then, to his assistant, he added: "Chick, I'll bet you a hat that the commissioner has come here to discuss the same matter."

"I won't take the bet," replied the assistant, "for I shouldn't at all wonder if you were right. It reminds me, Nick, of the old Night Hawk organization, which I believe originated in Philadelphia, and gradually extended all over the country."

"It brought it to my mind, also," said the detective, as he left his chair and started for the door. There he paused for a moment, and remarked:

"You'd better not go out, Chick, without my knowledge, for I may want to have you with us in this consultation."

The commissioner of police was awaiting him in the library, and as the detective shook hands with him, he remarked:

"I think, commissioner, that this is the first time that you have ever visited my house. I mean personally, of course. There have been a good many commissioners of police here one time and another, but I think it is the first time you have ever called here."

"That hasn't been because of any reluctance on my part to come, Nick," was the response; "but you know what a busy man I am—how little time I have for anything outside of the regular work of the department."

"Yes, I know."

"So I must confess that it is business that has brought me here this morning."

"I guessed that much, of course."

"I suppose, Nick, you have been reading the papers lately?"

"Yes, I make a point of going very thoroughly through them every morning."

"Then you have not failed to notice the roast that the department is getting all along the line for its seeming inadequacy to contend against the wave of crime that has been sweeping over the city of late."

Nick nodded.

"Well," continued the commissioner, "I have come here this morning to tell you that the thing has got beyond endurance. I don't mean the roasting we receive from the papers, for I must admit that that is more or less excusable under the circumstances, but if the representatives of the papers knew just what enormous proportions that wave of crime has attained, they would certainly be astonished."

"How do you account for it, commissioner?" asked the detective.

"I cannot account for it, Nick—only in one way."

"What is that?"

"Before I answer your question, let me make a statement."

"All right. Go ahead."

"For the last three months there has seemed to be a general outbreak of crime of all sorts throughout the city. They are not committed in any special locality; they extend from the utmost limit of Queens to the jumping-off place in Richmond, and from the outlying districts of the Bronx to the Battery wall of Manhattan. They reach from Bergen Beach and Flatlands to the Hudson River, and crime is as rampant in the outlying districts of this great city as it is in the crowded quarters of Manhattan itself. And I want to say, Nick, that the whole thing seems to be governed by a system; it seems to be controlled by some man who is at the head and front of it; who has the force and the energy, the self-reliance and the daring, not only to contend with us, but to defy us. In fact, Carter, I have been so impressed with this idea that I have come to the conclusion that there is a regular organization of crime in existence which may in time extend to other cities."

"I think you are right about that, commissioner," said the detective quietly.

"Wait a moment, Nick, I haven't finished yet. As a matter of fact, there has not one-quarter of the crimes that have been committed been printed in the papers. I have had to adopt a system of secrecy in the department, in order to keep these things from the public knowledge.

I have given strict orders among the lieutenants on the force, and, wherever it is possible to keep information from a reporter, it is done, or he is supplied with such meager details that he gives it no more than a stick of type in his paper."

"Well, commissioner, what is the occasion of your call upon me?"

"Why, there could only be one reason for it, and that is that I want you to take charge of this thing for me for a while, and see if something cannot be done to stop this business."

The detective was silent for a moment, and then he remarked:

"I think you are right, commissioner, about the theory of the organization of the criminals, and, if you are right, there is only one way to put a stop to what you have called the 'wave of crime.'"

"What is that, Nick?"

"It is that we should aim directly at the organization itself, and not at any one or more of the specific crimes that are committed."

"I understand," said the commissioner, nodding. "I had thought of that idea myself, only the difficulty in accomplishing any such purpose as you suggest seems to me to be insurmountable.

"You must understand, Nick, that I have been dreaming about this matter a good deal; I mean by that that I have been thinking it over quietly by myself, and I have arrived at certain conclusions regarding it."

"What are they?"

"If we start on the hypothesis——"

"One moment, commissioner. Don't let us have anything to do with the subjunctive mood. Let us say we *will* start out with an hypothesis of the existence of the Criminal's Trust. Let us say that there is such an organization as you have suggested. That it is organized and commanded by one such man, or a set of two or three men, who have it thoroughly under their control; and now go ahead."

"Very well; starting on that hypothesis, then, and supposing that there is one master mind at the head of this affair, whom we will refer to as the Chief of the Crooks, how are we to get at him without following up some specific crime?"

"That would be the least available way of getting at him at all," said Nick easily, "for you must understand that his power lies in his ability to conceal his identity thoroughly, not only from society, upon which he preys, but from his own men, as well."

"By Jove! I hadn't thought of that!"

"That, commissioner, would be the very first necessity that would arise in perfecting an organization of that kind. There is no such thing as honor among thieves, save in story-books; once in a while you will find a criminal who will stick by a pal, but it is never because they are in the same business that he does so, but rather it is because of some personal affection that exists between the two men. They probably would not call it affection, but it is a sort of liking and reliance upon each other that they have in danger and in the commission of their crimes; but there is no honor among thieves. No man hesitates, as a rule, to betray another where it is to his personal advantage to do so; and always provided he is convinced that his associate will not discover that he has acted the traitor. A criminal who thus acts as a stool-pigeon is apt to die very suddenly."

"I know that to be true," admitted the commissioner.

"And so this man, who is at the head of the organization, if he understands his business, as he evidently does, knew in the beginning that he could only obtain and hold the control of the criminals he commanded by keeping his identity a mystery to them."

"I see the point; I think you are right about it, Carter."

"Every crook is superstitious, commissioner. Every crook is fond of mystery, while at the same time he hates it with every impulse that he possesses. But you take a crook that comes into an organization such as we believe exists; bring him to the point of agreeing to become a member of it, and submitting himself to the orders of the chief of it, and then envelope that chief in as much mystery as can possibly be brought to bear upon the conditions, and you have the crook where he not only obeys the orders of his chief literally, not only because he has found it to his advantage to do so, but he will not oppose them, because he presently becomes so frightened at the possible consequences to himself if he fails to obey them; he is a veritable slave to that unknown master who controls him."

"I see, I see, Mr. Carter."

"Now, let us take a specific crime. Take for example that bank-robbery that happened only the other day."

"What one do you mean, Nick? There have been so many that I don't quite follow you."

"I am referring now to the Runyon case, where the young man was a teller in a bank and stole ninety-six thousand dollars, which he carried away in a suit-case."

"Oh, yes; well, what do you make of that?"

"There is a crime, commissioner, which, on the face of it, had nothing to do with this organization which you want to find. If it had been directed by the Chief of the Crooks, none of that money would have been recovered, and the chances are a thousand to one that Runyon himself would never have been captured."

"Well? What are you getting at?"

"This: if that crime had been the work of this organization, and I have selected that as a specific case to follow up in order to get at the Chief of the Crooks, or in other words, to get at the organization itself; or, if, furthermore, I had been fortunate enough to have found

Runyon and arrested him, he would not have been able to tell me about the man that controls that organization any more than you are at this moment.

"Even admitting that he is weak and that he would be willing to tell all he knew, he still would have had no information that would have been worth an hour's labor on your part or mine."

"Well, then," said the commissioner, "how are you going to get at it?"

"There is only one way," said Nick.

"How is that,"

"I must play the Jimmy McPartland act and become a crook myself—that is if I take up the matter at all."

"Of course you will take it, Nick. That goes without saying."

CHAPTER II.

OUTLINING THE CRIMINAL TRUST.

The detective, without offering an explanation at all, now gave the letters which he had received that morning, and which he had brought with him, into the hands of the commissioner, and watched that official silently while he read them.

"You see, commissioner," he said, when the latter had laid them aside one by one without comment, but nevertheless with a puzzled expression on his face, "the same conditions seem to exist in other cities besides this one. Boston's complaint is almost the same as Chicago's, and Philadelphia's is almost exactly like the other cities'. They are all, in fact, the same as yours."

"Yes," said the commissioner.

"And so," said the detective, "we are to conclude that the condition of which you complain is general throughout at least four of the cities of the country, and I have no doubt it extends to others, only we have not heard from them. It so happens that four of them, if I include you in the number, have appealed to me to help them out of the difficulty and it is very logical to conclude that as many others have called upon some one else."

"And is it your idea, Nick, that these are all part and parcel with the same affair?"

"Yes; that is my idea."

"Admitting that the one man we call Chief of the Crooks does exist, is it your opinion that his authority is as great in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston as it is in New York?"

"Yes."

"Then we run up against another difficulty, don't we?"

"Seems to me, commissioner, that we're up against a good many."

"Yes, I know; but there's one in particular that strikes me forcibly just now."

"What is that?"

"How are we to determine where the real headquarters of this Chief of the Crooks is?"

The detective laughed.

"I don't think that need concern us at the present moment, commissioner. In order to find the headquarters of this Criminal Trust, as we have agreed to call it, some person, myself or Chick or Patsy, or all three of us, must become, for the time, criminals ourselves; and the thing can only be worked up to gradually."

"You think you can do it, Carter?"

"I think it can be done."

"Are you willing to try it?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do in regard to these letters you have received?"

"I don't know; I haven't decided as yet."

"You admit, do you not, that I have the first claim upon your services?"

"Oh, yes, commissioner, in a certain way, you have. This is my home city and of course I am more interested in it than in any of the others."

"If it's a question of pay, Carter——"

"It isn't a question of money, at all, commissioner, and you ought to understand that it is wholly a question of expedience. Just now, I am in doubt whether I can accomplish more by remaining here or going elsewhere, and when I take up this matter I shall act wholly upon my own responsibility. But you must know that whether I go to Chicago, Boston, or Philadelphia, or any other city, or if I remain here, the whole case will ultimately work itself out to the same conclusion."

"Yes; I quite agree with you now that I understand it."

"In the meantime, commissioner, I have a suggestion to make to you."

"Well?"

"It is that you follow out precisely the line you have adopted in this matter."

"I don't think I quite understand you."

"I mean that I wish you to keep it a secret that you have called upon me in reference to the wave of crime that is sweeping over the city. I wish you not to let it be known that I have interested myself in this matter at all or that you have sought my aid."

"I will agree to that, certainly."

"And I would suggest also, commissioner, that you would pursue with undiminished zeal each specific case that arises. Perhaps undiminished zeal is not the expression I should have used; I mean with added zeal. Put additional men on the cases. Stir up your force to its best efforts. Make your people understand they must find these criminals who are committing these crimes and attach a penalty to your orders."

"But you told me just now that specific crimes would have nothing to do with the ultimate outcome of the case."

"No. I told you I didn't think we could find the Chief of the Crooks by following up any specific crime. I told you that I believed that he had concealed his identity so thoroughly and so surrounded himself with mystery that he is personally unknown to the men who acknowledged allegiance to him. "You see, commissioner, I want to use this additional effort you will make to trace out specific crimes as a shield for what I shall do myself with the aid of my assistants."

"I understand you, now."

"I am reminded, commissioner, of an experience that I had a number of years ago in reference to an organization of criminals that was perfected in the city of Philadelphia and who called themselves the Night Hawks.

"That occurred while you were still connected with the United States Army and before you were connected at all with police affairs. Philadelphia had become overrun by an organized band of criminals which was divided into sections in the manner of any secret society that possesses two or three or more degrees. At that time Chick and I took the matter up. We went to Philadelphia, and I was enabled finally to work my way into the secret meetings of the different branches of that organization, and ultimately came to know personally the man who was at the head of it and who was known to his followers only as the King Hawk. Their organization was divided into degrees called flights. For example, there was a first, second, and third flight of the Hawks, representing the first, second, and third degrees of the organization, and above and beyond them was still a higher degree, which they called the Feathered Nest, and which consisted of the chiefs of each local organization.

"For example, the Feathered Nest was, in the beginning, located in Philadelphia. The members of the Feathered Nest consisted of the chiefs of the organization from New York, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, Boston, and other cities throughout the country. It was presided over by the King Hawk, who was the brains of the entire outfit and who, strangely enough, I finally drove to cover and arrested in Kansas City afterward.

"Now, commissioner, my idea is that there is another organization built upon about the same lines, and the headquarters of it is as likely to be in San Francisco or Chicago as in New York.

"The Night Hawks had unlimited cash with which to bribe judges, juries, and officials for the protection of the men, and I have no doubt that this Criminal's Trust is supplied in the same manner and will stop at nothing to protect and to fight for the men who gave it obedience.

"So you see, we are literally fighting against millions, and not only that, we have opposed to us men who are as intelligent as we are.

"The only possible way in which we can hope to get at the bone and sinew of the matter is to go about it in exactly the same manner as I broke up the Night Hawks. I, at least, must become a member of that Criminal's Trust, and one or more of my assistants must do the same thing. It will take time, energy, patience, and money."

"All right, Nick," said the commissioner, laughing, "if you will supply the energy and the patience, I will see to it that there is no lack of money to meet the necessary expenses."

"It would not surprise me," pursued the detective, after a moment of silence, "if this thing has been thought out and organized by one of the old members of the Night Hawk gang, or at least by some person who was cognizant of their work. A man by the name of Pollock was the King Hawk, but he is dead."

"Whoever he is, Nick, I think you will find him ultimately."

"Oh, yes; I will find him ultimately."

"And do I understand, then, that you take the case?" asked the commissioner, rising and reaching for his hat.

"Yes, I take it on the conditions I have named."

"What are those? You had better specify them."

"First: That you will not let it be known that you have applied to me or that I am associated in any way with you in the matter."

"Agreed."

"Second: That you will redouble your efforts in following up these specific cases of crimes that occur within your jurisdiction."

"Agreed."

"Third: That you are not to call upon me for any report and are not to expect me to make one until I am prepared to do so on my own initiative."

"Agreed."

"Fourth: That whatever bill of expenses I may submit from time to time or when I am through, will be passed by you without question."

"I agree to that of course."

"I make this last stipulation because there is no doubt I will have to use considerable money in one way or another, and now, commissioner, there is still another condition that I must make."

"Well?"

"If in the course of your crusade against the criminals who are operating in and about Greater New York, your men should arrest a supposed criminal who expresses a desire to see you personally, I want you to consent to see him and to go to him at the first opportunity, taking care that your talk with him will not be overheard by a third party. If that man should ask you for a pencil and should write down in your presence on a slip of paper, or on anything that is handy, my full name, spelling it backward, this way—Retrac Kcin, and should exhibit that to you, and then carefully tear up the paper he had

written upon, I want you to know that that man is in my employ and he is to be set at liberty or permitted to escape with the least possible delay, or will be permitted to follow out any plans he suggests to you."

"That is a good idea, Nick, and I certainly will do as you say."

"Very well, commissioner, I think we pretty well understand each other now."

"Do you wish me to advance you any money at the present time in prosecuting this case?"

"No, commissioner; it is a good paymaster who pays when the work is done."

"Do I understand that you will begin operations at once?"

"You may understand that there will be no more delay anywhere in the prosecution of this case than I deem to be absolutely necessary."

"And if I or one of my men might pick up a clue that might be of service to you, Nick, how am I to communicate with you?"

"You are not to attempt to have any communication with me whatever unless I apply to you. I would rather that you wouldn't come here again or to appear to have anything to do with me until this case is finished, and there is another thing, commissioner, to which I ought to call your attention."

"Yes?"

"In an organization of this kind, nothing is neglected by the men who have it in charge. Its power and strength depends upon the information which it has at hand against the powers that rule; and, therefore, they doubtless have spies everywhere. I think if there could be a thorough exposé of their methods made at this moment, you would discover that there are spies of the Criminal's Trust now located at Police Headquarters and throughout the precincts of the city."

"Great Scott, Nick! Do you mean to say that my own uniformed men would join such an organization as that one?"

"What I mean to say is that in an organization of so many thousands as you have under your charge now, there are always men who are not honest. There is not a police office in the world that does not contain its quota of crooks."

"I suppose not."

"I tell you this in order that you may be on your guard. In order that you may take nobody into your confidence, not even down at headquarters, unless it be a person whom you know of your own knowledge to be worthy of that confidence."

"Very well, Nick, I will remember it."

"With that understanding, commissioner, I think we may consider the preliminary arrangements as settled."

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER SELECTS A NEW DISGUISE.

As soon as the detective was alone, he called Chick and Patsy to him in the library.

"My lads," he said, "you both have good reason to remember the experiences we had with the Night Hawks of the Quaker City. You, Chick, have already read the letters I received from Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston this morning, and know about the commissioner's call here immediately after I had read them over; and you, Patsy, may read them for your own edification now."

He waited while Patsy went through the letters carefully with pursed lips and thoughtful brow, and then he continued.

"The commissioner's story to me was almost identical with the contents of those letters. In other words, the same conditions exist here in and about the city of New York that obtain in those cities that have communicated with me; and I have no doubt that we will find the same conditions existing, or approximately the same, in other large cities.

"The whole thing resolves itself into the existence of what the commissioner and I have agreed to name a Criminal Trust, outlined and organized on something of the same plans as the Night Hawks.

"I have agreed with the commissioner that I would take up this matter and it is understood between us that our connection with it is to remain a secret.

"Now, we have got to approach it in the same manner that the other case was handled, and I am going to send you, Chick, to Philadelphia to report to the director of public safety there, and you, Patsy, may go to Boston, which seems to be more or less a lucky place for you.

"Chick, I want you to start for Philadelphia this afternoon or evening, having made yourself up in the meantime to represent me, and I want you during your visit there to carry out the idea that you are Nick Carter. Fix your make-up so it will be as permanent as possible, and don't deny that you are Nick Carter under any circumstances unless I direct you to do so.

"Patsy, you will go to Boston in your own proper person and will report to the chief of police there that Nick Carter has been called to Philadelphia on the same case and that you have been sent to him to take my place.

"You will each of you explain to the two heads of department my theories of the case as evidenced in the letters I have received, and in my talk with the commissioner in New York.

"I leave you both free to pursue your methods of work as you deem best, with the understanding that there is only one way to accomplish anything, and that

is by figuring it out so that you can join this particular organization of criminals in those respective cities.

"To do that, you must agree upon a password with the chief so that if either of you are arrested or get into trouble of any kind, you can make yourselves known or can call for assistance at any time that you require it.

"Now, I don't think that either of you require any further instructions."

"How about reporting back to you?" asked Chick.

"I don't want any reports made back to me unless there is something definite to say, and by that I mean that unless you have discovered something of enough importance so that you think I ought to know it without delay."

"And in that case?" asked Patsy.

"In that case you are to get your message to me as best you can, only being assured that it does not become known to a third party. You see, my lads, there is no doubt at all that the Criminal Trust has a very thorough spy system. I wouldn't like you, for instance, to trust to telephones, telegrams, or, least of all letters. If either of you are suspected to be other than what you represent yourselves to be, you will be watched very closely and in any case, in working your way into the Criminal Trust in order to become a member of it, you will be watched and spied upon in every move you make, in every word you utter, in every letter you write, telegram you send or telephonic message you attempt to deliver; and so, in casting you adrift as I do, I am putting you upon your own resources entirely. If there is any communication that you must make to me, come to this house with it, no matter how far you have to travel to do so, or at least send some one with the message whom you know absolutely that you can trust."

The two assistants bowed their acquiescence to this command, and Nick continued:

"It is a dangerous thing to accomplish what you two are undertaking now. If you succeed in working your way into the membership of this organization, it will not suffice that you will not be found out for what you are, but you must so conduct yourselves that you will be above suspicion. Men like those in charge of the Criminal Trust do not wait for proof that a man is not worthy of their confidence. They put him out of the way the moment they suspect him."

"Is it permitted to ask questions?" requested Patsy.

"Certainly. Ask anything you want."

"Have you any idea where the headquarters of this organization is located?"

"No more than you have."

"Doesn't it strike you as rather odd that you should be called upon for assistance from four different chiefs of police at once?"

"No. That is merely an effect from a cause. If the Criminal Trust is what I think it is, their organization is already perfected in the four cities you refer to and is gradually spreading out to other localities. The coincidence in the matter of the letters exists merely in the fact that each of the four cities discovered at the same time that they were becoming engulfed in a wave of crime."

"Are you going to do your part of the work here in New York?" asked Chick.

"I don't know; probably I will. At least, I will look about me here pretty thoroughly; but I am as likely to show up in Philadelphia or Boston as to remain here. I cannot foresee now what I will do."

"What about the Chicago letter?" asked Patsy. "Who is going there?"

"I haven't decided yet what I will do about that. If Ten-Ichi were here I would, of course, send him, but he is taking his vacation at home in Japan, as you know, and is not likely to return at all. I have thought of Connor in Washington, but it is doubtful if he could get leave of absence from the secret service long enough to help me out, so I will decide about the Chicago end of it later."

"Is that all that you care to say to us about the matter?" asked Chick.

"Yes, only that I want you to be careful how you start out on these assignments. If the spy system of the Criminal Trust is as complete as I imagine it to be, the leaders of it already know that the commissioner has been here to see me this morning and their local leaders in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston are acquainted with the fact that letters have been sent to me from each of those places, even if they do not know the contents of them."

"Don't you think, chief," asked Patsy, with a smile, "that perhaps you are giving them credit for a too thorough organization?"

"No, Patsy, I do not. There are two things you must always bear in mind when you are up against a proposition of this kind."

Patsy nodded and waited.

"One is that when a criminal is smart enough to go into a matter like this one and to create an organization such as we deem this to be, he is also wise enough not to begin active operations until he is thoroughly prepared to do so; a good general plans his line of retreat before he makes the advance, and this Criminal Trust has been operating now about three months at least. The other one is that when you want to succeed in any undertaking it is a good plan always to give your opponent credit for knowing a little more than you do; for being a little wiser than you are, and for being in a measure prepared in advance for every effort you make against him."

"You told me to go to Boston in my own proper per-

son," said Patsy. "Don't you think it would be well for me to wear a disguise?"

"I think it would be well for you to appear there in disguise, but I would like you to find a way to adopt it while you are on the journey there. Whether or not you are likely to be followed from here—and I do not think it is likely—I want you to act on the assumption that you will be and to cover your tracks exactly as if you knew there were two or three of the best shadows in the country following you."

"All, right," said Patsy. "Now I understand you and now I know what to do."

"But," said Chick, "inasmuch as I am to represent you, I suppose you'd like me to go openly."

"Yes, Chick, I want you to have Danny drive you to the ferry in the automobile and to make your entire trip to Philadelphia in the open. I want you to go and see the director of public safety as Nick Carter and to send your card up to him as Nick Carter."

"But won't every crook in Philadelphia know then or suppose then that Nick Carter is there?"

"Yes, Chick, and I want them to keep on supposing so for a time, although when you leave the director of public safety you can disappear for a time if you think it wise; as I have already told you, you must act on your own responsibility entirely."

"But your idea is, isn't it, that you want the crooks in New York to think that Nick Carter has gone to Philadelphia?"

"Exactly."

"And you want me to make it so plain that he has done so that they will have no doubt of it?"

"That's the idea."

"And that will leave you with a comparatively free hand here?"

"That is about the way I figure it out."

The detective assisted Chick in his preparations and himself put a few additional touches to the first assistant's make-up when he was ready to depart. Patsy, in the meantime, had packed his grip and gone, but it was not until two o'clock in the afternoon that Danny took Chick away in the automobile—Chick, who so closely resembled Nick that not one of his intimate acquaintances would have known the difference had they encountered him on the street or even talked with him; and Joseph followed him out to the curb for a last word before the departure, while Nick, inside the house, peered smilingly through the curtains at them.

But as soon as Chick was gone from the house, Nick repaired to his study and called Joseph to him.

"Joseph," he said, "how would you like a vacation?"

"A vacation, sir?" asked the surprised Joseph.

"Yes, I'm going to give you leave of absence. I've been thinking that perhaps you'd like to pay a visit to that cousin of yours who lives somewhere over in Jersey, and I'm going to let you go over there and stay till I send for you. How would that suit you?"

"It would be very pleasant, Mr. Carter."

"I only make one condition, Joseph, upon giving you this vacation, and that is this:"

"Yes, sir."

"I am going to change your appearance so that your favorite cousin over there won't know you when he sees you, and I want you to continue to wear the disguise I shall supply you with until I give you permission to drop it."

"Oh, yes, sir; I can do that," replied the delighted Joseph, for he was always eager to help the detective.

"And in the meantime," pursued Nick, "there will be another Joseph here in your place."

"Another Joseph here, sir? Do you mean that I am not to return?"

"Oh, no; not that. You are to return when I send for you. But, Joseph, it has become very necessary that I should adopt a disguise that I have never assumed before, and so for a little time I am going to become my own valet. When you have left the house, Joseph will be here still on duty, but I will be Joseph, not you!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS CLIENT.

The conversation that the detective had with his valet, Joseph, as recorded at the close of the last chapter, was recited here only to make the reader cognizant of at least one plan that the detective had in mind in sending Chick away disguised as he was to represent Nick Carter.

And now, when Joseph had taken his departure, made up to represent a man of twice his age and with nothing at all left to him that resembled the Joseph we know, Nick consumed the better part of an hour in transforming himself into a representation of Joseph that was so perfect that he smiled with satisfaction when he confronted himself in the mirror.

For of course he had all of Joseph's wardrobe to call upon and his constant association with the man had made him so perfectly familiar with all of Joseph's mannerisms and peculiarities that there was nothing left to the imagination in Nick Carter's rendition of the part.

It was well along toward four o'clock in the afternoon by the time the detective had completed all these preliminaries, and inasmuch as he had not planned beyond that point, and as yet had no idea of what his movements would be while he was clad in the guise of Joseph, he passed into the library and took down a favorite book to enjoy some reading while he smoked a cigar in solitude. The idea that had been uppermost in the detective's mind ever since the receipt of those letters and his

conversation with the commissioner, was that the Criminal Trust, in preparing itself for the epidemic of crime it was to inaugurate, had assuredly not neglected to place one or more spies upon the movements of Nick Carter himself.

In assigning their spies to their several duties; in filling the police courts and station-houses and headquarters with them; in placing individual spies upon certain official detectives who were connected directly with the departments, it would not be likely that a man such as the Chief of the Crooks must be, would neglect Nick Carter, and the detective had no doubt that he had been himself under espionage for a long time, perhaps during the three months they figured that the Criminal Trust had been in operation.

It is no reflection upon Nick Carter that he had not been made positively aware of such a condition, for it was rarely that he looked after or suspected the existence of spies or shadows save when he was engaged upon some specific case where it would be to the interest of some person or some group of persons to know about his movements.

But he recalled now several instances in the past few weeks when it had occurred to him vaguely that he had noticed one person or another often enough in his vicinity to suggest the idea that he was a spy, but Nick had paid no attention to these incidents because there had been no good reason to do so. Now, however, he recalled them as bearing out the theory that he had in mind. He figured as he sat there with the open book on his knee, at which, by the way, he had not glanced at all, that in sending Chick away to Philadelphia disguised as himself he had only partly misled those who might be watching him.

They of course were quite familiar with his adeptness at disguises and would look upon any move that he or his assistants might make with more or less suspicion, dependent upon the circumstances by which it was surrounded.

In the case of Chick, he had no doubt they would attempt to verify his identity with Nick Carter in person; and, to accomplish that, one or more men would be sent on Chick's trail to Philadelphia.

These same spies might have seen the departure of Patsy, and if the Criminal Trust was as active as Nick believed it to be, Patsy would also have been followed to Boston.

Again, these men had doubtless witnessed the going away of Joseph, disguised as he was as an old man, who had taken the Hoboken ferry on leaving New York. Of course if representatives of the Criminal Trust were in sufficient abundance in the neighborhood of the detective's house, Joseph would also have been followed, for they would have regarded that old man as being Chick in disguise, for as yet, viewed from the outside, Chick remained the only one who was not accounted for—if they believed that Nick Carter had gone. In the character of Joseph, Nick realized that he would not be able to do much detective-work or that he could not do it without betraying himself, since Joseph was the one member of the family who never went out on cases to assist his master and whose talents were comprehended more in his wise silence and perfect trustworthiness than in any quality of initiative he had been known to take.

But the spies outside the house—if there were spies—would, from their standpoint, have seen first the departure of Patsy, then of Nick Carter, then of a third individual whom they could not recognize and whom they would naturally suppose to be the other assistant. They would follow Patsy to Boston, the supposed Nick Carter to Philadelphia, and the third man would eventually take them to a little country town in New Jersey, where he would sit upon the piazza or walk around the grounds among the flowers, apparently with no greater object in life than killing time.

"No," the detective murmured to himself, "if the Criminal Trust does exist; if it is founded and holds good on the principles or rather the lack of them that I suspect; if spies in the interest of that syndicate of crooks have been surrounding my house, one or more of them are still in the neighborhood. There isn't any doubt whatever that they are entirely familiar with the personal of my household, and they know that Joseph only should remain here now. I think it would be a good idea for me to show myself on the door-step."

He left his chair and started for the door, but he was only half-way to it when he saw a shadow through the glass on the outside and heard the ring of the bell to announce that some one was there demanding admittance. He waited a moment in order to be in conformity with Joseph's leisurely habits, and then passed to the door and opened it, discovering a tall, elegantly dressed man, who stepped forward as the door opened and inquired in a rich and musical voice:

"Is Mr. Carter at home?"

"No," replied Nick in his character of Joseph, "Mr. Carter is not at home to anybody to-day?"

"Ah, indeed. Has he left town?"

"Really, sir, I could not answer that question," replied Nick in Joseph's most forbidding and dignified manner. He had stepped backward a little and thrown the door wide ajar and now the stranger moved forward and passed into the hall.

"Perhaps, then, you will take my card to one of his assistants," he said, and he produced one from a red morocco case that he took from his waistcoat pocket.

Nick received the card in Joseph's most austere manner and, having deposited it on a tray that was near the door, answered:

"Not one of the assistants is at home either. I will, however, see that Mr. Carter gets your card when he returns."

"What!" exclaimed the caller. "Is Chick away, also?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Chickering is not at home."

"Perhaps you can tell me where he has gone?",

"No, sir; I could not give you that information. He is not at home."

"And Patsy? Where is he?"

"Patsy is not at home."

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anybody at home. Is that the case, my good man?"

"I am here, sir, and the housekeeper is here and the other servants are here."

"Can you tell me when Mr. Carter or when one of his assistants will return?"

"No, sir, I haven't an idea."

"They don't leave you very well stocked with information concerning their movements, do they?"

"If they did so, sir, it would not be my duty to impart it to others."

"Very good! Very good! 'Pon my word you are a model servant. What might your name be?"

"I am called Joseph."

"Ah! Joseph, eh?"

The stranger ostentatiously thrust a hand deep into one of his pockets, from which he drew forth a roll of bills as big as his fist and having detached one from the outside of it—it was a five-dollar bill—he folded it twice lengthwise and then extended it toward the supposed Joseph.

"Will you accept a small evidence of my good opinion of you, Joseph?" he said, with a genial smile, "and at the same time permit me to rest myself here for a few minutes?"

"You may rest and welcome, sir," replied the detective, adopting the air of frigidity that belonged exclusively to Joseph himself, "but I cannot accept your offer of money, which I am sure is made with the very best intentions in the world. I beg you to return it to your pocket, sir, and if you will follow me to the library, you may rest there as long as you please."

"You are, indeed, a model servant!" exclaimed the stranger, with a loud laugh which was filled with good nature, as he followed the detective through the hall and into the library, where the supposed Joseph indicated a great leather-covered armchair in which he might be seated.

"I suppose," he said, as he threw himself into the chair, "that there is not much use of my waiting for Nick Carter's return, is there?"

"That is as you please, sir," was the reply. "There is never any knowing when he may return. Mr. Chickering might possibly be in the house at the present moment, for while we have been standing in the upper hall he could have come in by the basement way without our knowledge, if he were outside and wished to do so."

"Which means, I suppose," exclaimed the stranger, with another laugh, "that you don't propose to give me any information whatever about him or any of his assistants."

"Yes, sir; if you choose to take it so."

"You have been in Mr. Carter's employ for a long time, haven't you, Joseph?"

"Yes, sir; a number of years."

"He's a great detective, isn't he, Joseph?"

"I suppose that is the general opinion."

"He's always very good to you, I suppose?"

"I am quite sure that he intends to be so, sir."

"Does that mean that he doesn't always succeed?"

"It would be very unbecoming of me to make any such assertion as that."

"Joseph, you are certainly beyond reproach! It is not often that a man acquires such a faithful servant as you are, who not only refuses a substantial tip and declines to give any information whatever about his master, but who will not even admit that there are times when that master becomes impatient and neglectful, or perhaps severe. Joseph, have you any detective qualities about you?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

"Don't you think that if I were to state a case to you that was of considerable importance that you could restate it to your master when he returns?"

"I could do that; yes, sir."

"Do you think you are competent to give me any advice yourself on a subject of that kind?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, it would be folly in taking up your time and my own, to recite the case to you, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir; unless you wished me to relate it to my master when he returns, as you suggested a moment ago."

"On second thought, I guess I won't ask you to do that, Joseph. You see, when things are repeated second-hand, they are not always given the same meaning as the first time."

"That is very true."

"And so I think I better make some arrangement about seeing Mr. Carter myself. When did you say he would return?"

"I didn't say."

"Is he likely to be here to-night, do you think?"

"It is possible."

"Do you suppose if I should call here to-morrow morning there would be any likelihood that I would find him?"

"I could not say as to that. You might call and find out."

"How about Chick? Do you think there is any possibility of my finding him here?"

"I would have to make the same reply to that question as to the other one."

The stranger left his chair and crossed the room toward the door, but when he reached it, paused and turned; then he said:

"All right, Joseph. I will drop in to-morrow morning, or perhaps some time this evening, if I happen to be passing this way. In the meantime I will leave a message which you may deliver to Nick Carter or to either of his assistants, if one of them should happen to return here."

"Yes, sir."

"You may give the one who returns first my card, and you may say that I have information to impart to him or them concerning the organization and equipment of a gang of criminals that now exists in this city. You may say that it is information which I think he would very much like to obtain, and, Joseph, if you have any means of communicating with your master or one of his assistants, you may send that message so that one of them will meet me here when I call."

"Will you call this evening or in the morning, sir?"

"I will call to-night at ten o'clock."

CHAPTER V.

THE TEN-O'CLOCK VISITOR.

The supposed Joseph bowed the stranger to the door and through it, but as soon as Nick Carter stood alone with the door closed between him and the street, he chuckled audibly, while he told himself:

"There, without doubt, is one of the members of the Criminal Trust, and unless I am greatly mistaken, one who is in authority. The visit of the commissioner to me this morning and the writing of the letters from the different cities to me, about which they have been informed by telegraph, has focused their attention upon me for the time being, and now they wish to know exactly what I and my assistants are doing. I'd give a good deal if I had some one here whom I could send out to shadow that man, although I doubt very much if any one, not excepting myself, could do it successfully. He would not have ventured to come here unless he had already arranged a method to throw any one off the track who might follow him from this house. However, I think I'll give them something to do, and I'll get a little amusement out of it, if nothing else, for the rest of the afternoon."

He rang the bell for the housekeeper, and when she appeared said to her:

"Mrs. Peters, I am obliged to go out this afternoon on some special work I have to do for Mr. Carter. His directions are that while I am gone you will put the chain up at the door and not open it to admit any one until I return, and you will say to any one who calls that there is nobody at home and you do not know when anybody will be at home."

Ten minutes later he was in the street strolling slowly down the avenue and with every sense on the alert to detect any effort that was made to follow him. With this point in view, he made several turns, and it was not long before he became convinced that two men were alternating with each other in pursuit of him.

The card which the stranger had left with the man he supposed to be Joseph had engraved upon it the name: "Mr. Algernon John Hogarth," a high-sounding name that was quite in keeping with the man himself.

But, all the same, the detective had no doubt that Mr. Algernon John Hogarth possessed many names which he made use of as occasion might require and that even now he was directing the pursuit of the supposed valet with the idea that Joseph had gone out to convey a message—the message he had left—to his master or to one of Nick Carter's assistants.

As soon as the detective was thoroughly convinced that he was shadowed, he made directly for the Hotel Mammoth, where he passed in at one door and out at another upon a different street, and then coolly walked around and entered again at the door he had used the first time. Then he stopped and waited a few moments until he was sure that at least one of the men was watching him, whereupon he went deliberately to the telephone-exchange of the hotel and asked for the number which was the detective's call. He knew that Mrs. Peters would respond to it, and a moment later he was seated in the booth talking to her.

Again he imitated Joseph's voice, and merely informed her over the wire that he had called her up simply as a blind because two men had followed him since he left the house, and he wished them to discover that he had communicated back with it by telephone.

That done, he hung up the receiver and left the hotel, noticing, with a smile, that not only one but both of the men who had been shadowing him were standing a little apart not far away, waiting for him to leave the booth.

He walked deliberately out of the hotel and took his way directly back to the detective's residence, noticing now that only one of the men followed him, and, therefore, surmising, as was indeed the case, that the other one was using the opportunity to talk with the girl in charge of the exchange in order first to find out what number Joseph had called up, and next the location of that number. It can be readily seen that the detective's plan was rather a deep one, for he wished to give the man who had called upon him, if indeed he was behind these two shadows, the idea that Nick Carter or one of his two assistants was still in the house, and make him believe, if he could, that the valet had left the house

and telephoned back to it merely as a blind to deceive anybody who might be watching.

"When they find out that Joseph went to the Hotel Mammoth merely to telephone back to the house he had just left," he mused, "they won't know quite what to think of it, but I think my object is attained in conveying the notion to the fellow who calls himself Hogarth, that Chick, the first assistant, is still in the house. Anyhow, Chick will be there to meet him when he calls to-night."

The detective did not wish to make any move in the matter of prosecuting the case in hand until he had given Chick and Patsy each time enough to arrive at those respective destinations, and to begin operations at those points, and so, when he returned to the house, he determined to remain there until after the departure of the caller whom he expected at ten that evening, and in anticipation of that event he repaired to his study, and, having divested himself of his disguise as Joseph, he redisguised himself as rapidly and as perfectly as possible as Chick.

For the reader must know, if he doesn't already know it, that while Nick Carter and his first assistant did not resemble each other enough so they could be said to look alike, they are so nearly similar in physique, and their long intercourse with each other has made them so nearly the same in method and manner, that it is never difficult for one to make up to represent the other; and, furthermore, they have often practised this deception between them, and many is the time when Chick has gone out in the guise of Nick, and vice versa. Therefore, when at the stroke of ten o'clock that night the door-bell rang, the man who stood upon the threshold when Nick opened the door believed that without any doubt he was confronted by the first assistant, or must have believed so, if he was at all familiar with Chickering Carter's personality.

"Mr. Hogarth, I believe," said Chick, stepping back so that the man could enter. "I was expecting you to call, sir."

"Yes," said the man, passing into the house and heading directly for the library, where he had been shown earlier in the day; "I left such a message with Joseph, who said you were away at the time. I thought my message would bring one of you back here, by the sound of it."

"It was rather an odd message," said Nick. "I have been wondering since if it were not a hoax."

"Not at all," said Hogarth. "I was never more in earnest in my life."

"The message," said Nick, "if I can quote it correctly, was to the effect that you knew something about an organized gang of crooks existing in this city, and that you desired to impart the information to Nick Carter or to one of his assistants."

"That's the idea precisely."

"Well, sir, do you wish to give me that information?"

"If you are Mr. Chickering Carter, as I suppose you to be, I do."

"Very well; go ahead."

"Are you Nick Carter's first assistant, Chick?"

"As you said just now, I am supposed to be."

"Won't you answer me definitely?"

"I think that is quite definite enough for the purpose."

"Pardon me, but it isn't."

"No? Why not?"

"Well, I happen to know something about Nick Carter and his capabilities; for example, when I came here this afternoon the man who opened the door for me, who brought me into this room, and who talked to me here, told me that his name was Joseph, and that he was Nick Carter's valet, but, all the same, I know that Nick Carter is quite capable of having been that valet himself. Now, when I arrived a moment ago, you appear at the door, and you look very much like a young man who has been pointed out to me as Nick Carter's first assistant, Chick, but I know enough about him to realize that you may be Nick Carter, and not Chick at all."

"Of course," said Nick, smiling, "you cannot hold me responsible for all the wild theories you may entertain. I am here in the capacity of Mr. Carter's first assistant. If you have any information to impart to me I am ready to receive it. If you have no information to give me and no business with me, I must remind you that my time is too valuable to be employed in useless discussions."

The stranger laughed the same pleasant laugh that he had used in the afternoon, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, replied:

"It is a useless discussion, to be sure, and, aside from my own personal curiosity on the point, it makes no difference to me whether you are Nick Carter or Chick."

"Then, if you will proceed, sir."

"Oh, I'll do so in a minute. I told Joseph to tell you that I had some information about a syndicate of crooks or a gang of crooks."

"Yes."

"I wonder if you have noticed the unusual number of crimes that have been committed in and about the city of late. I wonder if Nick Carter has taken any notice of them."

"I think we are aware of the conditions, if that is what you mean," replied Nick.

"I wonder if it has occurred to you or to him that those crimes are the work of an organized gang?"

"The idea has been suggested to us; yes."

"By whom? By the police?"

"It is difficult to say where such suggestions come from always, but we have received that suggestion, and now I will be glad to hear anything that you may know about it in pursuit of the idea."

Hogarth hitched his chair forward a little and leaned toward the detective, while with an entire change of manner he said in a low tone which was meant to carry conviction with it:

"Such an organized gang does exist, Chick, if you will let me so address you. It is controlled by the greatest and smartest criminal in this country, if not in the world. He is a man who is a great organizer, and who stops at nothing to obtain his ends. He is a man without conscience and without heart, a man without pity and without remorse; a man who loves cruelty for cruelty's sake, and who delights in crime, just as a toper delights in drink. He is a man who is beyond the pale of human consideration, and is lower than the brute in every way save the one of intellect, and he is as greatly endowed as any man in the world in that particular. He has a mania for preying upon others. He is a human devil, if ever there was one, Chick."

"You describe a very repulsive individual," was the calm reply; "but what you say tells me nothing concerning the organization."

"The man is the organization. The men who work under him and who compose the gang are mere marionettes, who bow and skulk at his will, or who kill and destroy with impunity at his command."

"And do you know where I can find this man?" asked Nick. "Have you come here to give me information that will make it possible for me to trace out this gang you refer to; find where its headquarters are, and arrest the ringleaders of it? Are you prepared to supply me with witnesses sufficient to convict the man you mention of any one of the crimes he has committed, so that the community may be freed from his depredations?"

"I am the man who can do all that," was the calm reply.

CHAPTER VI.

A MESSAGE FOR NICK CARTER.

"Are you prepared to impart the information now?" asked the detective, after a pause.

"Yes, if you will comply with certain conditions I will make," was the reply.

"I am afraid," said Nick, "that I will be slow to agree to conditions. In the first place, Mr. Hogarth, you have come here of your own volition. I have not sought you nor have I expected this call from you. You come here making a statement of the fact that there is in this city a gang of criminals that preys upon humanity and murders men and women, and that it is presided over by a man whom you represent as a human vampire. You state no specific crime that this man and his followers have committed, and you leave everything up in the air, while at the same time you say that you must make conditions."

"They are not difficult for you to agree to, Chick."

"That may be very true, but I wish you would get down to facts as quickly as possible."

"I want you to promise me, first, that you will never in any way connect me with the information I give you, and, second, that when you have succeeded in capturing this master criminal, who is at the head and front of the gang I have mentioned, you will hold him in your power and permit me to have a private interview with him before you turn him over to justice."

The detective shook his head emphatically.

"To the first one of your conditions I will agree very readily," he said, "but to the second one, I will say no."

"Why?"

"There is no reason why I should give you any reason since no argument you could advance would alter my determination."

"It is a very small thing to ask that I be permitted an interview with the man whom you captured through my assistance and efforts."

"I don't want your assistance, and I don't want your efforts, Mr. Hogarth, and I doubt very much if I care about the information you are here to give me which you pretend to have at hand to deliver."

"Do you mean that you do not believe me?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"I believe, Mr. Hogarth, that you are not what you represent yourself to be. You come here with a cock-and-bull story about an organization of criminals which you expect me to believe. I think it is rather an affront to my intelligence."

"Don't you believe that such an organization exists?"

"Such an organization may exist, but I haven't any proof of it yet."

"Didn't you say that the idea had been suggested to you?"

"Yes."

"Didn't the commissioner of police call upon Nick Carter this morning and suggest the same idea?"

"You seem to be very well informed indeed about what is happening in Nick Carter's house," said the detective ironically.

The other man was silent for a moment, plainly annoyed with himself for the slip he had made, but after a moment he said slowly:

"I will waive the second condition I made if you will agree to the first one."

"What was it? I have forgotten," said Nick, with a yawn.

"It was that if I give you the information I have at hand that you will never betray me."

"Oh, I agree to that."

"Well, sir, there is an organization of criminals in this town such as I have described. It is controlled by a man whose picture I have tried to draw for you. It has its headquarters over on the Brooklyn shore of the bay, and in that part of the city or near it which is called Bay Ridge. There is a warehouse down there where they meet almost nightly, and if you will convey this information to Nick Carter and get him to make an appointment with me, I will meet him with you and two or three others, if he chooses to bring them along, any night you wish between now and Sunday, and will guide you to the place."

"That is very kind of you," said Nick, with an ironical smile, as if he did not believe one word that this man had uttered. He knew, or thought he knew, at least, that if he should agree to any such arrangement, it would only result in the laying of some trap by which these men would seek to get Nick Carter in their power. However, he regarded the present statement made by Hogarth as nothing more or less than a bluff to cover up his real purpose in calling at the house, which was to make himself aware, if possible, of what Nick Carter and his assistants were doing. Doubtless he had thought that by bringing up the subject of an organized gang of criminals he would draw some information from the detective's assistant, to whom he supposed he was talking.

But, thinking it not a bad idea to lead the man on as far as he would go, Nick asked:

"Why do you except Sunday night?"

"For no reason save that I shall have left town by that time."

"You say that this place of meeting is over on the Brooklyn shore at Bay Ridge?"

"Yes."

"That it is a warehouse?"

"Yes."

"Why not tell me about it now; where it is located and all about it, and leave me to find the place myself or let Mr. Carter do so at his own convenience?"

"Because," returned the man slowly, "it would be necessary that I should accompany you, in order to get you inside the place."

"How is that?"

"You have not the necessary passwords and signs."

"Ah! And passwords and signs are required, are they? How many?"

"There are a good many, and the peculiarity of it is one never knows where he will be asked to give them. These crooks have their pickets stationed outside the place of meeting, and they move about intercepting any one who may approach too near to it. A certain question asked calls for a specified answer, and if it be not given correctly, it is unsafe to approach any nearer to that place of meeting. Ordinary methods are used at first to turn any unwelcome strangers aside, but if they persist in approaching too near to the forbidden ground, they are dealt with harshly, and some of them disappear most mysteriously."

"I see; rather a wonderful organization, this, and how comes it, sir, that you know all these passwords and signs and tokens?"

"I possess them because I have been initiated into the order myself."

"Really; then you are one of the gang yourself; and you have the effrontery to come here and tell me of it."

"One moment, if you please. I am one of the gang because I was forced to join it. I went into it against my will, and since that time I have been under suspicion; there is not a moment of the day or night when my life is not in danger, and it is that intolerable condition which determined me to seek the aid of Nick Carter in order to disrupt the band and so free me from a condition that has become unendurable."

"All this is a very pretty story, Mr. Hogarth, if I could quite believe it, but it sounds, if you will permit me to say so, rather fishy. I think perhaps you may be a candidate for the pathological ward over at Bellevue, or that you have been drawing too largely on your imagination; or, and this is the most likely of the three, that you are trying to play a joke on Nick Carter."

"I give you my word, sir, it is none of the three. I am in deadly earnest in what I tell you."

"How comes it, then, that you are so well informed regarding this chief of the organization of crooks?"

"I am well informed because I have known him all my life. He is a relative of mine, although I will not tell you just how we are related, but what I have told you is the truth, and if you desire to communicate with me about it, or if Nick Carter should care to do so, I am at the Hotel Mammoth, and a letter sent to me there making an appointment to meet either of you will be received and acted upon. And now, I bid you good night."

"One moment, Mr. Hogarth, if you please. You have announced yourself here to me as an active member of an organized band of crooks and criminals. Do you think I would be justified in letting you depart after giving me this slender bit of information you have vouchsafed? Don't you think I am justified in placing you under arrest and taking you to police headquarters?"

The man shrugged his shoulders and smiled as he replied slowly:

"If you think, Mr. Chickering Carter, that that would be the best method of thanking me for what I have attempted to do, I shall offer no resistance."

"Oh, you may go," said Nick. "I was only returning bluff for bluff, but I will confess that I had a good mind a moment ago to take you to headquarters; they have a

method down there of getting information out of such men as you are."

The tall man rose to his full height, and his eyes showed something of the anger he felt because of the detective's cool insolence, for the reader must have already realized that Nick was trying his best to make his caller angry; but Hogarth kept himself well in hand, and it was only in the darkening of his eyes and the change in the character of his smile that Nick could deduct that his words had had any effect upon him at all.

"I have every right to be offended," said Hogarth coolly, slapping one hand with his gloves that he held in the other one. "I came here in good faith to impart certain information to your chief—information which I thought he would be glad to receive—and in return I receive nothing but insults from you."

"You must take them as you will," replied Nick coolly. "Mr. Carter's business is not with criminals, but against them. He seeks no advice or assistance from them. He never employs or makes use of stool-pigeons, and that is what you are if half of what you have suggested to me is true."

"Am I to understand that you will not investigate the matter of the warehouse that I have described to you?"

"You will understand that I will convey your message to Mr. Carter, and that he will act as he pleases about it: as for myself, I have nothing whatever to do with you unless he commands it, and then just as little as possible."

"Shall I expect some message from you at the Mammoth?"

"If Mr. Carter desires to send a message to you at the Mammoth, you will probably receive it—if you are really stopping there."

"Good night," said Hogarth abruptly, and he took three steps toward the door and turned.

"I suppose I am at liberty to depart?" he inquired, with cool effrontery.

"Yes, and you cannot go too quickly."

For a moment the two men stood facing each other across the few feet of distance that separated them, the detective palpably sneering and the tall man coldly defiant. After a moment he took a step nearer to the detective and in a low tone said:

"I wish I understood you better, Mr. Chickering Carter: it may be that you are what you seem to be, and it is possible that you are not, but whatever you are and whoever you are, carry this message to your chief for me: Tell him that I said that if he did not take my advice and make the most of the opportunity I had given him, he will live to see the day he regrets it. Tell him if he doesn't hunt down the master criminal who is at the head of that organized gang of crooks, that he will himself be hunted down. Tell him I know whereof I speak, because I have heard the threat openly made against him!"

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER CAPTURES A PRIZE.

The attitude that Hogarth had assumed and his demeanor throughout the interview that had just taken place thoroughly puzzled the detective. He did not doubt for a moment that the man was in some way, probably an authoritative one, associated with the Criminal Trust; and that he had a definite object other than could appear even to the intelligence of Nick Carter, in visiting that house and delivering the warning as he had done, was evident.

Of course Nick placed no credence whatever in the story of the warehouse used as headquarters by the crooks over in Brooklyn. He saw in that proposition of Hogarth's merely a desire on his part to lead the detective and his assistants into some trap whereby they might be overpowered and captured and afterward compelled to conform to certain conditions which the criminals would make whereby they could pursue their plans unhampered by the activity of Nick Carter and his men.

This no doubt was a part of the policy of the Criminal Trust, to get into its power men and officials who might be amenable to it; but why Hogarth or his associates should suppose that the detective could be hoodwinked by any such palpable subterfuge as the one he had adopted was beyond Nick Carter's understanding.

It was half-past ten o'clock at night when Hogarth took his leave; for the interview had lasted barely half an hour, and five minutes after he had gone Nick Carter was once more busily employed in restoring himself to the outward appearance of Joseph, but in addition to that he supplied himself with the means of making several additional changes in his disguise without the necessity of returning again to his home.

Hogarth had not been gone from the house to exceed half an hour when Nick Carter as the counterpart of Joseph, the valet, passed through the door and into the street, for, judging from what Hogarth had said, Nick had no doubt that they would be on the watch for his coming out, and would not only follow him, but would commit some overt act to betray themselves.

It was one of Nick Carter's pet practises that whenever his opponent in any case was so well concealed or so thoroughly hidden from him as to keep continually in the background, to force some act of aggression from this opponent by either laying himself open to personal attack or by assuming an attitude that he was much better informed than he really was. In the present case Nick recalled what Hogarth had said—and Nick wondered if the man knew how correctly he had guessed—

when he had stated his suspicions about the identity of the man who had left Nick Carter's house.

If Hogarth had been sincere in voicing such suspicions and was now on the lookout, he would see the supposed Joseph go upon the street and without doubt would follow him, either under the supposition that it was Joseph in person or that it was one of the detectives disguised as Joseph.

In any case, Nick knew that he would be followed, and from that fact he hoped to draw forth some aggressive act which would give him a clue to work upon.

When Nick descended the steps from the front door to the street, he could see the shadowy outlines of a man on the opposite side of it, whom he had no doubt was a spy, but this man, instead of taking the trail, as Nick had expected he would do more or less openly, calmly turned in the direction opposite that which the detective followed and walked away precisely as if the only idea he had was in permitting the supposed Joseph to take his own course unmolested.

Nick stood still a moment and watched him. He saw the man strike a match and light a cigar, doing it somewhat ostentatiously, the detective thought; a moment later, after he had traveled several paces farther on, he lighted a second match, as if he had not succeeded in obtaining a light for his cigar with the first one, and a little farther on, after another moment, he went through the same operation a third time.

"Now, that is some sort of a signal," mused the detective, still standing almost motionless beside the curb a few doors away from his own house.

He pondered over the idea for a moment, but at last shrugged his shoulders and turned down the avenue at a brisk walk and had arrived almost at the next corner when a closed carriage drove hastily around it and drew up quickly at the curb within a few feet of where Nick Carter was approaching it. Nick thought he knew now what the signal meant. He had seen just such tricks as this one played before, and he was, therefore, not surprised when the doors at each side of the carriage were thrown open simultaneously and four men leaped out of it, two on either side, while the remaining two, who had been on the driver's seat, also leaped to the curb and ran toward him. It was a sudden, although not altogether unexpected, attack, and there were six men engaged in it—six men who had succeeded in getting so close to the detective that he had no time to retreat, had he wished to do so, and very little opportunity to prepare any defense.

The carriage had driven up so close to where he was passing that with the stopping of it and his own advancing steps, only a few yards separated them when the attack was made.

The six men had planned their descent upon him so carefully that the detective found himself surrounded, and he understood now what the signal of the three lighted matches had portended.

But he did not know it all, as events proved, for when the attack was made and he was surrounded so suddenly, he could hear above the noises the men made the rumble of approaching wheels of another carriage that was driving toward him from an opposite direction, and he had no doubt in that instant that the number of his enemies would be perhaps doubled before he could hope to escape from them.

The first man who approached near enough to the detective received the full force of the Little Giant's fist in his face, and a second and a third one were treated to the same reception with the quickness of counting one—two—three. The remainder of the attacking party succeeded in getting closer to the detective. One of them threw himself upon the ground and managed to seize Nick by one of his legs; another whirled a sandbag in the air, and the third rushed into a clinch, while almost at the same moment the second carriage that had been referred to came up and stopped, and four more men joined the attack.

Even Nick Carter's great strength could not have contended successfully against such long odds but for the fact that his luck stood by him even in that supreme moment.

It happened that they were near a corner, and just at the instant of the second attack upon the detective three big blue-coated policemen, who were on the way to the station-house together, appeared suddenly upon the scene. They were near enough to see readily what was going on, and they were also far enough away for the men who were attacking the detective to discover them in time to escape; and so it followed that the attack was over almost as soon as it was begun, and that the men broke and fled, one or two of them running through the street and the others leaping upon and into the carriages, while the horses were driven away furiously.

One man alone was left behind; for Nick Carter's grasp was upon him, and when the fortunate interference came, the detective clung to him, realizing that in the possession of that one man he held the key to all his present difficulties.

It so happened that one of the three policemen who had appeared upon the scene so opportunely was known by sight and name to Nick Carter, and the moment he was close enough, Nick leaned forward and whispered rapidly in his ear:

"Arrest us both and take us both to the station-house. Don't let any difference in the way you treat us appear. I am Nick Carter."

The officer, who proved to be a sergeant, needed no further tip than that to understand what was expected of him, and he gave his orders harshly and loudly. So

that they might have been heard a block away, in which he made it known to any one who might be listening that he would not accept any explanations of the fight in the street, but insisted upon taking both men to the station-house to let them explain to the lieutenant in charge.

The captain was at the station-house when they arrived, and Nick soon sought an opportunity for a few words with him, so that presently the two prisoners were ordered to follow the captain into his private office, where the door was locked after "the boss" had given an order to the lieutenant at the desk that he was not to be disturbed under any circumstances until he came out again.

The fellow whom Nick had captured was in outward appearance a typical East Side tough. He looked like the pictures which artists sometimes draw for the papers to represent mob-men and burglars, and if Nick had searched the town over he could not have selected a better subject for the experiment he had suddenly decided to make.

The man was a lantern-jawed, heavy-browed fellow, with a shock of unkempt hair that was innocent of comb and brush; he had remained unshaven for at least two days, and he had the savagely gleaming but furtive eyes of the denizens of the underworld. Notwithstanding his repulsive appearance, he was well, even flashily, dressed; the clothes he wore were new and fitted him very well indeed, and a huge diamond glistened in his shirt-front, and there were others glowing from either hand. A flashy necktie was tied in a bow around the high collar, now mussed and rumpled by the none too gentle hands of the detective, and a dinky derby hat which had been severely dented in the mêlée was set so jauntily on one side of his head that the brim of it seemed almost to rest upon his ear. In short, he was the typical mob-man who had made a big strike; who had clothed himself accordingly; whose pockets were lined with money, and who was undoubtedly out for a good time, and Nick Carter could not have conceived anything better for his purpose.

The attitude of the detective while he stood there in the captain's office coolly studying this man must have been exceedingly aggravating to the object of that scrutiny, for the flashily dressed burglar became more and more uneasy, until finally he blurted out angrily:

"Well, mister, I hope that you'll know me next time you see me. If it wasn' that I am in the office of a captain of police, I'd smash your bloomin' mug for you!"

Nick laughed softly, and, without replying directly, turned to the captain and said:

"We have drawn a prize, captain. If I had searched over the whole city I couldn't have found—I doubt if I could have described—what I wanted as this man. I wonder if you will see me out in a little plan that I have formed since I have got him in the light where I can see him perfectly."

"Sure, Carter," replied the captain; "I will help you out in anything you want to do. You can count on me for that."

"What's that?" exclaimed the burglar. "Carter! Say, are you Nick Carter, and is that 'ere genteel servant outfit one of your disguises? Am I dreamin', or am I up against Nick Carter for fair?"

"I think," replied Nick quietly, "you will discover it is no dream. I am Nick Carter, and I have some very important uses for you, my man. If you don't offer too many impediments to what I have to propose, it will go easy with you. Otherwise I won't answer for the consequences."

CHAPTER VIII.

HARRY THE HERMIT.

The burglar sank slowly upon a chair which was near at hand, and sat there gazing at the detective in a condition of stupid surprise, while he muttered over and over again to himself:

"Well, I'm blowed; if I ain't up against it, I'm a liar!" and other expressions to the same effect, showing that he was completely nonplused by the unmistakable evidence that he had thrust himself into insurmountable difficulties at the very moment when he had started out to spend his money and have a good time.

"Captain," said the detective, turning to the police officer, "you won't mind, will you, letting me have this room for a little while? I think this man will talk a great deal better with only one than he will with two."

"You are dead right about that, Mr. Carter," said the burglar.

"Use the room as long as you like, Nick," replied the captain, "and when you want me again, just press that button there and the doorman will answer you," and the captain left the room without another word.

As soon as the detective was alone with the burglar he drew a second chair forward within a few feet of him and seated himself there, facing the man; then, without speaking, he slowly removed the more apparent outward representations of Joseph, until, although not entirely restored to his own personality, he had still performed enough of a change to convince the burglar of the previous existence of a perfect disguise; and this was all that was needed to reduce the man to a state of abject admiration.

"Say, Nick Carter," he said, with a savage grin on his face, "if I could do that trick the way you do it I'd own the world."

"Would you?" asked Nick, smiling.

"I sure would. Why, I could make up one day as the dook of somethin' and rob the palace, and the next

day I could be nosing around, pretending I was some infernal 'tec' searching for the thief. Oh, I'd win out for fair if I could do that trick!"

"What is your name?" asked the detective.

"Well, mister, that depends. Just at this present moment, mister, any name will do me. You might call me John Doe or Richard Roe, just as the fancy happens to take you. I'd answer to either just as if ut belonged to me."

"Well, John Doe or Richard Roe, you listen to me now while I make a little sketch for your benefit. I am Nick Carter, whom you know something about. You are a mob-man and a burglar, the head one of the bunch, and cracking rich cribs is your lay. I don't happen to know who you are, but I don't think it would take very long for me to find out if I chose to make inquiries. You are evidently an English crook who has not been in this country very long, although there isn't much in your talk to denote it. But it is evident to me that you have just finished up a successful robbery, and that you have got considerable of the profits you derived from it in your pockets, while the rest is buried where you will know how to find it when you want it. Now, you probably know something about me, and know that I keep my word when I give it, don't you?"

"That's what I've been told. I've never happened to clap eyes on you before, but I have heard a lot about you."

"Well, here are two propositions, either of which you may take. The first one is if you will give me your name, and I mean the name that you are known by among your pals and the other members of your mob, and will post me sufficiently about your habits, so I can make successful use of it, you shall go into solitary confinement in a place I know of, and will be kept there only so long as I need your services, and by your services I mean your absence from your usual haunts. If you consent to this, when I have finished what I want to do, you will be set at liberty with no questions asked, on condition that you leave New York within twenty-four hours."

"That sounds pretty fair, mister, as far as it goes, except one part of it, which makes me think you want me to peach on my pals. That I won't do, not if you give me forty years! That I have never done, and I won't begin now. I don't know your lay, but perhaps when I do I'll understand it better. What's the other proposition?"

"The other proposition is that if you refuse to do what I have asked of you, I will leave you here in charge of the captain of this precinct until I find out who you are, and, having looked up your past record, and also until I nail that last burglary, from the proceeds of which you have purchased those elegant clothes you have got on right now, and if you oblige me to do that, Mr. Burglar, you are going to get all that's coming to you, and then more."

"I think I see the point," said the burglar moodily.

"Well, what have you got to say about it?"

"Looks to me as though I was sort of between the frying-pan and the fire, and I was going to get singed whichever way I flopped."

"I wouldn't look at it that way," said Nick. "I have merely given you the choice of ten days or a little more of solitary confinement where you will have all you want to eat and drink, and live like a lord, or ten years or more of State's prison—and you know what that means."

The burglar dropped his eyes and studied the figures in the rug for a few moments in silence, and then he replied abruptly:

"I think I'd be a fool to hesitate in my choice, don't you?"

"I think you would," said Nick.

"Well, I'll take the ten days more or less and answer your questions, Nick Carter, always with the understanding that you don't expect me to betray any of my pals."

"You shall be the judge of that yourself," responded the detective. "I will ask you the questions I want answered as they occur to me. If it strikes you that the answering of any one of them will act as a betrayal of any of your friends, we'll argue the case."

"That sounds pretty fair. Go on."

"What is your name?"

"Well, as I told you before I have got a lot of 'em. Which one do you want?"

"I want first the name that you call your own; the one you are most generally known by."

"Hank Holbrook is the name I'm called, but if you look up the records, as you threatened to do just now, you'd find half a dozen others with that little word 'alias' between each two of 'em."

"How are you called among your friends?"

The burglar looked up with a leering smile as he responded slowly:

"Well, Carter, you'll know when I tell you that I'm generally known as the Hermit."

"Ah!" said Nick. "I do. Go on."

"My pals over here, such as they are, generally call me Harry, although sometimes they shorten it to Hank, but they all know me as Hank or Harry or the Hermit, whichever handle comes handiest for them to take hold of."

"You've just finished up a job, haven't you?"

"Yes; but I ain't goin' to tell you where it was or what it was or who was in it with me."

"I haven't asked you that yet. Where do you hang out."

"Oh, I've got a room all by my little lone-some down in Grove Street; I ain't called the Hermit for nothin'."

"You don't like to have your pals too closely around you, I see," said Nick, smiling.

"Well, pals is all right up to a certain extent, but my experience is that if I want to provide a getaway, it's best to have it by my little lonesome, and that's the way I do business."

"Do you know a man who passes under the name of Hogarth?" asked Nick, and springing the question so sharply that the burglar was unprepared for it.

For a moment he was silent, and then he replied:

"Look here, Carter, I'm pretty square for a fellow in my line of business. I know that there is such a man as what you have named, but I don't know anything about him, and, if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"That is sufficient answer, Harry. Now, who was the boss of that last job of yours; I mean you need not tell me the name of the man, but I want to know if you were at the head of the mob."

"I sure was."

"But the job was picked out for you by somebody else, wasn't it?"

"I'd like to know how the devil you know that?"

"Am I right? Wasn't the work laid out for you? The job planned for you? The crib selected for you? And all the preliminaries worked out which it sometimes takes you months to arrange, done for you?"

"I don't see any particular harm in admitting that; it was dead easy. I did in one night what it would ordinarily have taken me months to get ready to do."

"Exactly," said Nick; "and now answer this question and bear in mind that I'm not asking you to tell me who the man is or where he lives, but didn't orders come to you in the name of some person whom you have promised to obey, to do that job?"

Again the burglar hesitated, turning the question over carefully in his mind, and then, with apparent reluctance, he nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Yes," he admitted; "but I don't know how the devil you knew it."

"Do you know who that man is who sent you the order? I am not asking you who he is, but do you know who he is?"

"No, I don't; and if I did——"

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No, I don't."

"You recognize him, don't you, as the chief of an organized gang, of which you have lately become a member?"

"I'm going to shy that question, if it's all the same to you, Nick Carter."

"The fact that you object to it is sufficient answer. If you had had a negative ready, you would have given it."

"That's all right, Mr. Detective; I ain't got any sort of objections to your drawing your own conclusions from anything I don't say, but I ain't going to be put into the position of giving any of my pals the double-cross."

"Do you call this man who sent you the order a pal?"

"No, I don't."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No, I haven't."

"Do you know what kind of a looking man he is?"

"I don't know any more about him than you do."

"But if he sends you an order you will obey it, will you not?"

"That's what I've agreed to do."

"How do these orders come to you?"

"That's none of your business!"

"How many men are members of your own particular mob?"

"Just five—the usual number."

"And they are all members of this other gang, are they not?"

"I suppose they are; I never asked them."

"Did you select them yourself as members of your mob or were they selected for you?"

"Aw, say! Didn't I just tell you that I had nothin' to do only to crack the crib when it was all made ready for me?"

"What saloon do you hang out in most of the time when you are lying around town with nothing doing?"

"Oh, there's quite a bunch of 'em. There's Paddy the Pig's; I reckon I go there as much as any place."

"Tell me at what place you and the other members of your mob met to make the final arrangements for this last job of yours."

"We sort of drifted into the back room of Paddy's. We blew in one at a time, and was introduced to each other by mutual friends; you know how it's worked, but you mustn't hold Paddy responsible for any of this."

"Oh, I'm not holding anybody responsible. I'm only learning something about your habits."

"Go on, then; I don't mind answering your questions as long as you don't ask me to give anybody the double-cross."

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER PLAYS A LONE HAND.

Nick Carter knew perfectly well that he could not hope even by threats to obtain any information from Harry the Hermit which would tend to incriminate any of his friends in crime, and beyond what the man had already told him there was very little information to be gleaned which would be of use to the detective unless indeed the man could be prevailed upon to give some definite information about the gang of thugs of which he had become a member.

But even if he could have persuaded the burglar to talk on those subjects, Nick knew that the information

thus obtained would be unreliable, and realized that at almost any point the man, who had already shown himself to be a crafty proposition, could easily arrange a trap for him into which he would unexpectedly fall, should he follow blindly any such directions.

As a matter of fact, Nick had already obtained from Harry all the information he wanted for the furtherance of his present plans, and so, instead of proceeding with the questions, he summoned the captain to the room again and said to him:

"Will you send one of your men to Hegeman's drug-store in the Times Building for me and have him procure a list of articles that I will write down for him?"

"Certainly," replied the captain. "He shall go at once. Make out your list."

And so it happened that shortly afterward, for the third time since noon of that day, Nick Carter made himself up to represent another definite person entirely, this time it was the physiognomy and the brutish face of Harry the Hermit that he adopted.

The list sent to Hegeman's drug-store supplied him with the articles he required in reproducing the fierce, hard face and lantern-jaws of the burglar, and the captain and the cracksman sat there in the room watching him in silent admiration while he created the character bit by bit as perfectly as he did everything that he undertook to do.

When the transformation was complete, when the detective had padded himself so that the flashy clothing of the burglar fitted him; when he had applied the last touches from the trimming of the shock wig he had sent out for and procured, to the utmost and apparently most unimportant detail, it looked, save for the clothing that the burglar now wore, which the captain had kindly provided, as if there were two Hank Holbrooks in the private office of the captain of the precinct, but before the detective could depart from the station-house he had another duty to perform to render his disguise perfect, and he said to the captain:

"I wonder if you would give that sergeant who brought us in here a leave of absence for a short time, or, at least, until I am through with him. Could you let him do something for me, captain?"

"I think so."

"Call him in here, will you?"

When the sergeant appeared, the detective pointed to the clothing he had laid aside and which had been a part of his disguise as Joseph, and said:

"I have left one hundred dollars in bills in the trousers of that suit which will be yours if you will put those clothes on and let me make you up to look like the man I appeared to be when you brought me here, and if, afterward, you will carry out the orders I shall give you exactly as I state them. The captain has already consented that you shall do it, and you will have an easy time for the next few days."

"I'm on," replied the sergeant, with a grin.

We need not describe in detail the change that Nick Carter wrought in the appearance of that police officer. Suffice it to say that he was presently sent away to Nick's house with a note in his pocket addressed to Mrs. Peters, the housekeeper, and that he was guarded on his way there by two policemen in uniform, who acted as escort in order to carry out the deception.

Holbrook, when all these preparations were completed, was taken to a room with barred windows, at the top of the station-house, far removed from the regular cells—a room such as all station-houses are provided with for the temporary confinement of recalcitrant policemen, and there he was told that he must remain until Nick Carter chose to release him. He was told, moreover, that if he kept quiet, made no objections, and did not attempt to send any message of any kind outside the building, he would be provided with all he wished to eat and drink and smoke and read, and would be treated as a guest rather than as a prisoner. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that he was permitted to retain all of the personal property he had possessed save only that Nick borrowed the diamonds and his watch and chain, promising to return them when the prisoner should be released.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when all these arrangements were completed and when Nick Carter was led from the captain's room to the desk in the station-house to face the lieutenant who was in charge behind it.

And the captain said to the lieutenant so that any one standing near might plainly hear him:

"This fellow gives a pretty good account of himself, lieutenant, and you can just scratch his name off the blotter and let him go. That row he was engaged in was only a little street-fight, and I don't think we want to hold him for it."

And so, a few moments later, Nick Carter, in the character of Harry the Hermit, otherwise Hank Holbrook, the burglar, walked deliberately out of the station-house and turned toward Sixth Avenue, strutting along with the jaunty, insolent air of the Hermit himself and with the outward appearances of all the self-assurance of victory over the cops who had temporarily interfered with him. It is not a great distance from that station-house to the saloon of Paddy the Pig, and there is no resort in New York which it is more impossible to enter "after hours" than this one, if the person who seeks to be admitted is unknown to the proprietor or his lookout, and has no friend inside who will vouch for him; likewise, there is no resort in the greater city which is more easy of access after hours to one who is known or is properly vouched for, and Nick could not have selected an hour out of the twenty-four when he

could have appeared there to better advantage in the character of Harry the Hermit.

When he rang the bell and had waited for a moment or two, the door opened about three inches, and was held there by two chains on the inside of it, while the lookout behind it studied his appearance carefully, looking to see if he was alone, for it is rarely that more than one person will be admitted at a time under such circumstances. But after a moment he exclaimed:

"Hello, Hank; back again?" and, removing the chains, admitted the detective to the place.

Nick walked in and seated himself at one of the tables apart from the others, of whom there were probably a score who were in the room. As he entered he kept his eyes lowered, purposely avoiding encountering any glance of a person who was there, for he was in the extraordinary position of knowing by name no one in that room who was there as a guest, while without doubt as Harry the Hermit he was himself known to many of them.

And so he avoided the glances that were directed at him, and, having selected a table by himself, threw himself upon a chair and surlily ordered a drink, while in the same ugly tone he added:

"See what the others'll have, too. Treat the bunch. The drinks are on me."

While the bartender was absent procuring the refreshments, a man who was seated at the opposite side of the room arose and crossed it and dropped into the chair opposite Nick, and, as he did so, he inquired:

"Pinched you, didn't they, Harry?"

"That's what they did," replied Nick gruffly. "Cost me a pretty penny to get out of it, too."

"How'd you work it, Harry?"

"Aw, drop it. Change the subject. That ain't my line of grait; engagin' in street-fights, and it don't make any difference who gives orders hereafter, it's the last business of the kind I'll undertake."

The man at the opposite side of the table laughed softly, and replied:

"I guess you'd obey orders, all right, if you got 'em."

"Hanged if I would!" replied the supposed Harry.

"You don't mean to say you'd go back on the oath you took, do you, Hermit?" demanded the man, in a fierce undertone, leaning heavily toward him.

"I mean," said Nick, in the surliest manner that he believed that Harry the Hermit could have adopted, "that I didn't go into this business for any such joshin' business as that, and I ain't goin' to do it any more, no matter who orders. You can carry that message for me to headquarters, if you want. Just say that I registered a kick, and that the kick goes, and that Hank Holbrook, the Hermit, will stand by it. I'm a cracksman, I am, and I'm willing to stand by anything that's on the level in the line of my own business, but I ain't no footpad and never was a thug, and I never played the strong-armed man but once in my life, and I was ashamed of that, and I'm hanged if I'm goin' outside the regular line of my business for any organization of crooks on earth, and won't obey any such orders if they are sent to me. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, and you can tell his nibs that, too, if you know how to send the word to him, because I don't."

The man who had seated himself opposite the detective listened to this tirade in utter silence but with the air of one who was thoroughly frightened by it. Now, when it was finished, he leaned forward and whispered eagerly:

"Say, Harry, don't make a fool of yourself!"

"Oh, I'm not makin' a fool of myself. I know how to take care of Harry the Hermit; don't you worry!"

"But you know what you're up against. You know the oath you took!"

"Hang the oath, and you, too! I won't stand for any such business as has been going on to-night."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so loud, Harry, the others here might hear you. As for me, you know I wouldn't give you away. That's not Jack Cracker's way, and you know it."

"I know that, Jack, all right; but this is a case where I'd rather you'd give me away than not. I'd like to have every bloomin' gun in the place hear what I had to say about it, and if there's anybody here who'll carry the message I have uttered to the proper place, he can't do it any too quick to suit me. That's final!"

He purposely raised his voice when he made this statement, and with the result he desired, for three others of the assemblage arose from the table where they were seated and came across the room to his own.

"What is that, Harry?" demanded one of them, in a low but fierce tone, and leaning toward him threateningly.

"I said," replied Nick defiantly, and leaning back in his chair, while he thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, "that I won't stand by such doings as has been goin' on to-night for any man or set of men or any organization on earth, and that if there is anybody in this room who wants to carry that message where it belongs, he's welcome to do it, just as quick as he knows how!"

"I reckon I'll do the carryin' of the message," said the man who was leaning toward Nick, and who stood close beside him now, and he wheeled on his heel while he motioned to one of the men in the place to follow him, and the two left the saloon without another word.

They had no sooner gone than Cracker leaned forward and whispered to Nick:

"You are up against it now for fair, Harry. You were a bloomin' fool to say that to Curley, for you might

have known he would go straight to headquarters with it."

"That's just exactly what I wanted him to do," retorted Nick Carter savagely.

CHAPTER X.

DEFYING THE CRIMINAL TRUST.

Nick Carter knew when he entered that saloon that he might consort with the frequenters for months without being able to discover any of the secrets which would lead him to the organization of the Criminal Trust itself, and he realized that in order to accomplish what he desired he would be obliged to follow out some such course as the one he had pursued.

The inspiration to do what he had done came to him as he walked into the back room and seated himself alone at the table as described. When the man who announced himself as Jack Cracker crossed the room and joined him, Nick guessed that he was one who was especially friendly with Harry the Hermit, and he became assured of that when he expressed himself so emphatically concerning the organization, of which he already appeared to be an unwilling member.

There are always in every organization men who are ready and willing to carry tales; there are always jealousies, and there are always those who are ambitious for advancement, and think it can be best procured by spying upon others and reporting them. None realized this characteristic more thoroughly than Nick Carter did, and it was, therefore, with a definite purpose that he expressed himself so savagely and surlily concerning the incidents of the night which had resulted in taking Harry the Hermit to the station-house. Nick did not doubt that Harry had been followed there when he was taken in charge by the officers; he did not doubt that one or more members of the gang had hung around outside waiting developments; his only surprise was that no one had stepped forward and spoken to him when he left the station-house.

Now, when the others had moved away from them again, and Cracker and he were once more alone, Nick leaned forward and addressed his companion in a tone that was so confidential the others could not hear him.

"What do you suppose Curley will do about that?" he said.

"He'll go straight to headquarters with it, of course. That's what I warned you about."

"Well, let him go. What of it?"

"Why couldn't you keep your trap closed, Harry?"

"Because it's my way, when I've got anything to say, to say it, that's why."

"I wonder if you realize what you're up against, now that you have said it?"

"Realize nothin'. Up against nothin'."

"You ain't, eh? I'll tell you for one that you'll be hauled before the Third Chief in less than two hours if you wait here till Curley comes back, and I'd go and get myself under cover and stay there till this thing blows over."

"Look here, Jack, I ain't doin' any mosyin', and I'm not under cover just now! I'm out for a good time!"

"It'll be a good time with a knife between your ribs or a dose of poison in your gullet if you keep on talkin' as you have to-night."

"Oh, I'll take my chances. I've been doin' it for thirty years, and I ain't goin' to welch on it now."

He turned, then, and called the waiter to him again, directing that everybody in the house be treated at his expense, and while he was attending to that, Cracker was called across the room to rejoin the party that he had been with, at another table, when Nick entered it.

For perhaps five minutes the detective remained alone, still assuming the air of one who was disgruntled over the occurrences of the night, and whose good temper had by no means returned; and so he remained until Cracker recrossed the room to him, this time accompanied by two companions, and they all drew chairs closely around the detective, and then Cracker leaned forward, while the others did the same, until their heads were all close together, and Cracker whispered:

"We've been talkin' this matter over, Harry, between us, and we've made up our minds that the best thing for you to do is to skip out."

"What for?" asked Nick.

"Well, it'll be an hour, anyhow, and mebbe more, before Curley can get back here. Of course those other two fellows that were over at the table with him are watchin' you, and if you go out now they'll follow, but Cross-eye and Spots and me have fixed it up between us so that if they follow you out, we'll follow them out. We're willin' to take a few chances to see you through this thing safely on condition that you'll send word by me that you're sorry for what you've said——"

"Say, Jack, drop that. Stow your jaw! I ain't sorry, and I mean to stand by all I've said, and, what's more, I ain't goin' to light out. I'm goin' to wait right here till Curley comes back; if you think he will come back."

"He sure will, just as soon as he gets orders in your case."

"Well, he can't come any too quick, and if he gets sassy, he'll find out what he's up against mighty soon."

"Won't you light out, Harry, and make yourself scarce for a day or two?" asked Cracker, with real concern in his voice.

"No, I won't."

"I'd like to have you do it."

"Well, I won't do it, and that settles it."

"We're takin' some chances ourselves in advising you to do this thing, Harry."

"Don't you suppose I know that, and do you think I'm goin' to let you do it? Did you ever know me, Jack Cracker, to go back on what I've said? I ain't used to being bossed over by any such outfit as this one that asks ten men to set onto one poor devil in the street. That ain't my style of doing business, and the sooner it is understood at headquarters of this organization, the better for all of us."

Again he had raised his voice so that the words carried to the other side of the room, and he noticed that the men who had been with Curley were regarding him attentively and listening to every utterance he made, as if they intended to remember them against him.

Cracker and his two friends were evidently disturbed, and their demeanor impressed Nick with the idea that perhaps he had unwittingly thrust himself into greater danger than he realized or imagined.

He knew nothing of this organization that he had so boldly defied in words and manner since he entered the saloon, but it was evident to him now that the others feared with deadly terror the powers that controlled them.

After a moment of silence, during which he thought deeply, Nick leaned forward and addressed Cracker directly.

"Will you take a walk outside with me for a few minutes, Jack?"

"Sure I will," was the reply.

"Will you get yourself in trouble by doing so, do you suppose?"

"I don't think so. I'll take the risk, anyhow."

"Spots, will you and Cross-eye wait here for us until we come back? We won't be gone more than half an hour at the most?"

"We'll sit right here at this table, if you say so," was the reply; "but don't forget that those fellows on the other side will follow you out."

"I don't think they will. Just watch my smoke!"

He started to his feet quickly, and, crossing the room to the table where the two spies were seated, and addressing them harshly, he said:

"You two guns were told to keep tabs on me when Curley went out, and I've got something to say to you. Daddy don't want any row here, or I'd take you both on here and now. I'm goin' outside to take a walk around the block, and Jack Cracker is going with me. We're coming back here, both of us, inside of half an hour, and you can put that down for a fact, but if either one of you fellows tries to trail along after us in this little expedition there won't either one of you be in shape to come back here. I'll tell you that you'll bring up in either the hospital or the morgue, if you try that on!"

He wheeled and returned to Cracker, with a curt, "Come on, Jack," and a nod to the bartender to let him out at the door, he strode defiantly out of the room, followed by the companion he had selected for his short walk.

"What in blazes are you up to now, Harry?" demanded Cracker, the moment they were on the pavement outside the building.

"I can tell you that, Jack, in mighty few words," responded the detective.

"Well, what is it?"

"I want you to put me next to all that I don't know concerning the organization."

"Why? You know as much as I do."

"No, I don't, either. I don't know anything. I didn't pay any attention; my mind was on something else. You tell me I'm up against something here; now tell me what I'm up against."

"You know the oath you took, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I tell you I wasn't paying any attention. Look here, Jack, you just tell me about it from your own standpoint just as though I didn't know anything at all about it, which will be pretty near the truth, when all is said."

Jack Cracker stopped abruptly in their slow walk along the avenue and turned and faced his companion with a puzzled expression in his countenance and manner.

"What's the matter with you, Harry?" he demanded. "You don't seem like yourself to-night."

"Mebbe I ain't like myself, Jack, but I wish you'd answer those questions of mine."

"You know as much about the organization as I do."

"I tell you I don't know anything about it."

"Well, at least you know this: You know you were taken into the organization on the promise that you would obey orders, and you know mighty well that when orders come to you in the name of the Third Chief, it's just the same as if they came from the First Chief, and you know mighty well without my telling you that to-night you have broken two of the rules. You broke one by talking in a loud voice about the organization where everybody could hear you, and where there were at least a dozen people present who don't belong to it, and you broke the other one by defying the authority that you have promised to obey; and as if that didn't satisfy you, you even wanted the message taken to headquarters of what you'd said and did, and to tell you the truth, Harry, if I was bettin' on your chances of living twenty-four

hours longer right now, I'd require mighty long odds to bet on you."

"Do you think Curley will come back, Jack?"

"Sure he'll come back."

"Who'll he bring with him?"

"I don't know, but he will bring all the help he needs, and you know as well as I do that all he's got to do is to lift his finger and do this, to make every one of us in that room assist him against you," and Jack Cracker made a sign like the letter S in the air in front of him.

"Have you any idea, Jack, where he will take me when he gets me?" asked the supposed Harry the Hermit.

"No; I wish I had."

"But you can follow and find out, can't you?"

"Gee whiz! That would be more than my life is worth; and do you mean to say that now that you are out of that place you intend to go back there and wait for Curley's return?"

"I certainly do. That's what I said, and I'm going to do it."

The detective saw that there was no use in prolonging this interview. He had hoped in bringing Cracker outside the saloon that he could worm some information out of him, but he perceived now how impossible it would be to do that without betraying himself, and he preferred letting matters continue as they were rather than run the risk of being treated as a spy from the outside and not as a member of the order who had been transgressing its rules.

"I reckon time's about up now, and we'll go back," he said, when they had walked another block in silence, and they turned and began to retrace their steps toward Paddy's saloon.

As they approached it, they could see that others were entering through that darkened doorway, and Cracker nudged Nick as he said hoarsely:

"That's Curley just gone in; take a fellow's advice and skip while you can!"

"Nary a skip!" said Nick, and he increased his pace so that he made the signal at the door soon after Curley and the men he had brought with him must have entered the back room of the saloon.

The bartender who had admitted them had not yet left the door, and was there to open it for Nick and Cracker, and while he remained to close it again Nick stepped forward rapidly and passed through the second door into the back room with its score or more of occupants.

The man Curley was standing in the space in the center of the room, and had evidently just been informed of the departure from it of Harry the Hermit, for as Nick entered the man exclaimed loudly:

"He's a sneak and a coward, anyhow, and I'll get him, just the same!"

"You will, eh?" said Nick, stepping forward quickly, and before Curley realized that he was attacked he felt himself seized and lifted clear of the floor, and then he was flung headlong and all in a heap into a far corner of it, while every man in the place started to his feet and stood staring at the unusual scene.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE COILS OF A SERPENT.

For a moment after Nick's sudden attack upon Curley, such utter consternation prevailed in that rear room of the saloon that not a person there thought to move forward to interfere; and Curley remained where he had fallen, dazed and half-unconscious from the shock of his fall, and with the breath effectually knocked out of his body.

But the reaction came after a moment, and with it all the members of the gang of crooks who were there rushed forward as one man, and fell upon the detective, bearing him to the floor and overpowering him with very little effort.

And that was precisely what the detective wished for; was precisely what he wanted; so he offered no resistance whatever to their attack, since no one made any effort to injure him, only to capture him.

Of all that throng that was congregated there, Cracker and Spots and Cross-eye were the only ones who remained in the background and took no part in the attack on the man they supposed to be Harry the Hermit.

No effort was made to bind the detective. He was merely surrounded and warned that if he made another effort to attack any one, he would get hurt, and he realized, by the quiet manner the men adopted, that they were in deadly earnest, and that it would be better for him to heed what they said.

In the meantime Curley had been assisted to his feet, and, having recovered his breath, was now proportion-

ately angry at the indignity that had been visited upon him.

As soon as he was able to do so, he thrust himself forward until he confronted the detective, and, planting himself squarely in front of Nick, exclaimed:

"I'll get even with you for this, you cur!"

Nick only smiled disdainfully upon him, and vouchsafed no reply; and Curley, in a transport of rage, shook his fist in the detective's face, and shouted:

"You'll roast for this, you dog! I'll see to it that you get what's coming to you—you can bet your life on that. There are enough of us here who heard and saw all that has happened, to swear your life away, and by the——"

"That'll be about enough from your trap, Curley," interrupted Cracker, forcing himself into and through the group until he confronted Curley. "You'll just do your duty, and I reckon you know what that is without any advice from me; but if you go in for trying to do anything to Harry that ain't regular, mebby you can guess what is likely to happen."

"I'll report you, too, if you don't shut your trap," growled Curley.

"What for, I'd like to know? You take my tip, Curley, and attend strictly to your duties, or you'll find that you're up against a proposition that you won't like."

In the meantime Paddy, the proprietor of the place, forced his way to the center of the group, and in his persuasive manner remarked:

"Look here, boys, I always treat you on the level, don't I? Sure! Well, I don't want any row in here at this time of night. I can't stand for it. My reputation won't stand for it. I want you to be quiet now, and settle down. If you have got anything coming against Harry, you must settle it outside—not here."

"I'm going to take him out of here," snarled Curley. "He is my prisoner, and——"

"You won't take him out of here unless he is willing to go," Paddy interrupted him. "If he wants to go with you, he can; but there mustn't be any force used. How is it, Harry? Do you choose to go away with these men."

"Look here, Paddy," Curley interposed, before Nick could reply. "I'm going to take that pup away from here whether he wants to go or not, and you hear me! You can't prevent it, and you had best not try to do it, or we will wreck your old shack and put you out of business. This is something that you don't know anything about, and you'd better keep your hands off."

"Don't worry, Paddy," said Nick. "I'll go along with them. I'll treat the house just once more before I start, though. Everybody say what he'll have!"

During the interval that followed, while the men there were taking their drinks, Cracker edged forward and attempted to whisper to Nick. What he said was, however, overheard by Curley.

"I'm going along with you to see fair play, no matter what comes of it," was what Cracker said; and Curley's reply to him, quick and harsh, was:

"You bet your life you're going! You're going as a prisoner of the order, too. You have got yourself about as deep into this thing as the Hermit has. Close in on 'em, boys, and help 'em along if they get shy."

Curley, who evidently knew his business, and who was doubtless in the enjoyment of considerable authority in that particular branch of the Criminal Trust, arranged his forces with four to walk in front of him and Nick. Behind them came Cracker, flanked on either side by one of Curley's adherents; and so they marched through the hallway and then out upon the street.

There, Nick was not surprised to discover that a carriage was awaiting them; one of the closed hack variety, which had been hastily summoned for the conveyance of the prisoners.

And Nick was invited to enter this, while Cracker was forced in after him; and then, with Curley and one of his men beside them, they were driven rapidly away, while the curtains of the hack were drawn so that they would be prevented from knowing what route was taken.

The reader must understand that Nick would have found no difficulty in freeing himself then, had he chosen to do so, for with his great strength it would have been an easy matter for him to have overcome the two men who guarded him; for Cracker was passive, and would not have fought against him. Moreover, Cracker was now so angry himself that it is likely that he would have sided with the supposed Hermit, had there been a row.

But that was the last thing the detective desired.

He had brought the row about for the mere purpose of getting himself taken to one of the headquarters of the gang, and now that his hopes were on the point of being realized, it was not likely that he would spoil it all by attemting an escape.

And Curley was recovering his temper, too. It was apparent that he had begun to think that perhaps he had gone too far in his language and threats, for presently he said, addressing no one in particular:

"I'm sorry about this; I am, for a fact. I was mad clear through, back there, but I am over it now, and I'm sorry."

Nobody replied to him, and after a moment he said:

"Are you going to hold this as a grudge against me, Hermit?"

"I'll think about that when I know what the outcome is to be," replied Nick calmly.

"I was only doing my duty. You know that; or at least you ought to know it."

"You went a little further than was necessary to do it, don't you think, Curley?"

"Maybe I did. I didn't mean to, though. And besides, didn't you say that you wanted the message carried to the powers? Eh?"

"I didn't tell you that I wanted to be called a cur and a dog and a lot of other names, that I'm not likely soon to forget. That was no part of your duty."

"I'm sorry about that, Hermit. I'll take it all back, if you'll let me."

"All right. Let 'er go. I'm not one to hold a grudge."

"Thank you, Hermit. And now, I suppose you recall another one of our rules, don't you?"

"I ain't no mind-reader and so I don't know which one you're talking about."

"You ain't forgot, have you, that you've got to be blindfolded—you and the Cracker. It's orders, and it's got to be done. I hope you ain't going to offer any objections; eh?"

"Narry a one. Go ahead with your rag. I don't care. It don't cut any ice with me. I ain't findin' any fault with you now. Do your duty, as I would have done mine, probably, under the same circumstances. I ain't committed no fault, only the one of objecting to making a common thug of myself, and I ain't going to do that for nobody."

"Shut your mouth, you cussed fool, can't you? Don't you know that I've got to report everything that you say?"

"Report, and welcome. I've only said what I mean;" by which it will be seen that Nick was at least living up to the part he was playing.

Nick's eyes—and also Cracker's—were bandaged securely, so they were unable to see anything at all; and after that the carriage they were in was driven rapidly straight ahead for a considerable distance. Afterward it made several turns, one after another, all of which were calculated to confuse the minds of the prisoners regarding the direction; but at last, after a drive of more than an hour, the hack came to a stop and the two prisoners were told to alight.

Nick judged that they were in that section of the city which is known, locally as Greenwich Village, and he remembered that one reference had been made to Grove street, that night. He wondered if by any chance Hank Holbrook lived close to the headquarters of the gang.

But he was afforded little or no time to contemplate upon these subjects, for the moment they were out upon the pavement, they were hustled forward, and presently Nick knew that he was led through a narrow alleyway between two houses, toward the rear of them.

Presently they crossed a flagged court, and then ascended a flight of several steps, whereupon a door was opened for them, and they passed though in silence, with only the noisy clanging of the door as it was banged shut, to apprise them of what had happened.

They remained there in silence for a few moments, evidently awaiting the coming of some person with a light, and presently Nick heard the following whispered dialogue, near him:

"Who comes here?"

"A faithful follower of the python, who vouches for those who are with him."

"Who has he with him?"

"Four other faithful followers of the serpent, and two who have been faithful until now, but who stand in need of correction."

"Enter, then, with them."

The small procession moved forward, at this. They passed through the door that was evidently closed in front of them, traversed a hall and passed through other doors, until at last the detective discovered that they had entered a large room that was carpeted with a thick carpet, and here they were led around and around in a circle, until at last they came to a stop at what seemed to Nick to be one end of the large room; and here another dialogue occurred.

"Whom have we here, who has been rendered blind and is therefore brought before us?"

"A prisoner, my lord, who has transgressed the rules of the order, and who is brought before the great python for correction."

"Why, then, do you pause here?"

"To obtain the password to the python, my lord."

"You already have it."

"I have it, but I cannot use it without your gracious permission."

"Begone, then, and make use of it. But have due care how you approach the royal serpent, lest he be angered and his coils enfold you; for when once you get within those coils, there is no release save in death. Go."

There were several more turns of the room after that, and at last Nick was pulled to a stop again; and then, without warning, the bandage was jerked away frim his eyes, and if he had not had his nerves so well in hand, he must have started backward with an exclamation of amazement and alarm, for there, directly in front of him and so close that the head of it hung menacingly above him, was an enormous serpent, so perfectly made and fashioned that nine men out of ten would have supposed it to be alive. Its jaws were distended, its eyes gleamed like two balls of fire, its red tongue darted in and out, alarmingly, and its huge coils shone and glistened and even moved in the lights that were thrown upon it from the darkened room behind where the detective stood.

But he regained his composure instantly, for he knew that at least he had attained to one step of his desires; he was within the headquarters of the organized gang of criminals he had pledged himself to overcome.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ARREST OF THE CHIEF.

It was manifest that this should have been no new scene to Nick Carter in the character he was supposed to represent. Harry the Hermit had been initiated into the order, and had therefore doubtless confronted the false python many times, and Nick knew that if he made a break of any sort, it would betray him instantly to the others who were there; and betrayal after he had entered so far into their secrets could mean nothing but sudden death.

The trial was, however, a farce, as he had suspected it would be. It being the first offense committed by the Hermit against the rules of the order, he was merely reprimanded, and told that with the next offense he would be condemned to death; and Nick, pretending to be thoroughly alarmed, was becomingly regretful of all that had happened and promised never to do so any more.

With that the trial ended, and he, with Cracker, was ordered to take his seat among the others who were present, and the regular business of the meeting proceeded.

The room was in an old storage-house; it occupied the top loft, and had been fitted up for the convenience of these men, to carry out the idea of their secret order—that of the Python.

The walls had been draped with burlap, in many colors, and imitation palms and potted plants were strewn around it, to represent as nearly as possible the appearance of a jungle. The floor was covered with red, the ceiling with blue, spotted with white stars. At one end there was a raised dais, or platform, and here was the chair in which the local chief of the order had his seat, while coiled around the chair, in frightful representation of a hideous serpent, was the mechanical python to which reference has been already made.

He seemed to be enfolded in the coils of the snake, but he, nevertheless, found no difficulty in moving about, or in leaving his chair when occasion required it.

Every man who was present in the room wore a domino and a half-mask, so that they all looked alike; the one exception to this costume being the chief's, who wore evening dress in lieu of the domino.

Once, during the ceremony of the trial, the chief removed his mask carelessly, in order to wipe the perspiration from his forehead, for it was hot in that room, and then Nick saw his face quite plainly; and he was not surprised to recognize instantly the man who had called upon him at his office, who had sought to lead him into a trap that had been arranged in a warehouse in Brooklyn, and who had given his name as Hogarth.

"So," the detective thought to himself, "I was not mistaken, after all. Algernon John Hogarth, who lives at the Hotel Mammoth, is the chief of the local order. Good! I think I know now what to do."

It was almost daylight when the meeting broke up. It seemed that there was no particular business to be transacted—doubtless it had all been done before the arrival of Nick and Cracker as prisoners there—so the para-

phernalia was put away, the dominos and masks were put aside, the huge serpent was folded in a compact mass and stowed away in a closet, and after that the men stood about in groups, conversing for a while. Some of them went away at once; others followed presently, and, after a time, Nick saw that only Cracker and himself were left in one of the groups, while the chief, with two others, were making their way toward the door.

"So-long, Jack," said the detective to his supposed friend. "I'll see you to-night at Paddy's, if you are going there. I'm going to trail along after the boss. I want a word or two with him. I'm not going to do anything rash, so please don't worry about me."

He turned away before Cracker could offer any objections, and when, a half-hour later, he followed Hogarth through the main entrance to the Mammoth, the latter would not have recognized him had he turned around, for Nick had found time on the way there to dispose of the wig and other accessories to the disguise he had adopted.

The hour was early in the morning, and the corridors of the great hotel were almost deserted; and Hogarth passed straight to the elevator without once looking backward, entered it, and was taken to the floor where his room was located.

When that same elevator descended again, Nick stepped upon it, for he had paused long enough to whisper to the clerk on duty at the desk, to make himself known to him, and to inform him that he had come there to make an arrest which he would consummate as quietly as possible, so that not another one of the guests should be aware that such a thing was happening.

And so the detective presently stepped from the elevator at the same floor where Hogarth had left it, and a moment later tapped softly upon the door of the room that Hogarth occupied; and he had now dispensed with all outward appearance of a disguise, so that when Hogarth opened the door he found himself confronted by Nick Carter, whom he instantly recognized.

He started backward and sought to close the door again, but Nick stepped quickly forward, forced the door farther open, and entered the room.

"You are my prisoner, Hogarth," he said calmly. "I was present at your meeting, which has just dispersed. You had me nicely in your power there, if you had only known it. I was Harry the Hermit. Do you realize what an opportunity you have missed?"

The man could only stare in speechless amazement. He had not yet recovered his wits from the surprise the detective had visited upon him.

"I can only arrest you on a technical charge," continued the detective. "I have not seen you in the actual commission of a crime, but I have heard you plan for crimes to be committed, and I have heard you refer to others that have already been done. I will merely have to lock you away somewhere for safe-keeping until I have gathered the evidence I need against you. Will you come quietly, or——"

Hogarth had had time to recover himself, and now he plunged forward toward the detective, hoping to overpower him and escape; but he found himself seized in a grip of iron from which he could not escape, and he was slowly but surely forced backward until he was deposited in a chair and handcuffs were slipped over his wrists; and then the detective made use of the room telephone to call up the nearest police-station and ask for an officer to take his man away for him.

When he arrived at his home, at half-past eight o'clock that morning, he found two telegrams awaiting him. One was from Boston, and the other came from Philadelphia, so he knew at once who had sent each of them, although no names were signed to the messages.

The one from Chick, from Philadelphia, contained one word, which was "Progress." The other, from Boston, and therefore from Patsy, was, "Have stirred up a nest of snakes." Both assured the detective that his assistants were succeeding in the assignments he had given them; so presently he seated himself and wrote the following note to the commissioner of police:

"My Dear Commissioner: I have spotted the local order of the Trust we were talking about. The chief of it is now at Captain Slocum's station-house, where he awaits your pleasure. I suggest that he be removed from there at once and kept from communicating with any other persons at all. This local order is only one of the many tails of the dog—and we want the dog, don't we? One of my assistants is in Philadelphia, where he reports progress; another is in Boston, from which I have also received a favorable report. It is only a question of a short time now before we will have the whole outfit rounded up so that we can take them all in at once, and put a stop for good to this epidemic of crime. I will call upon you during the day.

"Cordially yours,

"Nick Carter."

THE END.

The next number (560) will contain "A Syndicate of Crooks; or, Nick Carter's Great Prison Plot."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

"If the average Jacky had his way," says a retired naval officer, "there is little doubt that the after rail of his ship would be studded with parrots, cockatoos, and macaws. Marmosets would swarm up and down the standing rigging, playful puppies would tumble over each other on the quarter-deck; cats would litter the floor of the galley; and the holds would be infested with various species of wild beast cubs. Perhaps even the flying-jib boom might have its decoration in the shape of a saucer-eyed gorilla.

"In the navy, however, the sailor's propensities in this direction are curbed by his watchful first lieutenant, whose vision is as that of the lynx and whose most peremptory demand is for cleanliness.

"Jacky at sea is a busy man. Even in his hours off duty his industrious fingers are at work mending his hammock, stitching his jacket, making a new pair of trousers, or doing some of the nautical fancywork for which he is famous. When, however, his cares are all behind him, when the ship goes bowling along eleven knots an hour, with a steady breeze on her quarter, when all is snug below and aloft and it's Jack's 'watch below,' he sits on a coil of rope, sticks his black pipe in his mouth, and, surrounded by an enthusiastic circle, proceeds to train his pets.

"There is one story in the navy which has been handed down from generation to generation about an old foretopman on the *Constitution*. Will Birney was his name, and when he first went on board the Old Ironsides he made friends with a shaggy Newfoundland dog which had belonged to the ship from puppyhood.

"One day they were sailing in the tropics 'full and by' with a light, variable wind. Birney was steering, and he solemnly swore for years afterward that every time he let the ship go off or come up a half-point more than was necessary the dog would rush aft from the mizzen-hatch, where the serious-minded animal had stood looking up at the sails, and bark at the careless helmsman in the most contemptuous manner.

* * * *

"I remember that on one of our small coast-survey schooners there was once a litter of puppies belonging to the captain. They were to be allowed to remain on board until old enough to leave their mother, but during that stay on board they proved to be the worst of nuisances. The smartest and most energetic pup of the lot was a little fluffy black-and-white-spotted one called 'Spottycus the Gladiator,' and he led all the others in mischief.

"The pups had their meals immediately after the ward-room officers. Spottycus evidently made up his mind that it was an infringement of his dignity to be relegated to the second table, so one day he undertook a demonstration of his rights.

"It was a warm summer evening. The ward-room officers were just being helped to soup when there was a rush overhead, followed by a succession of tiny barks. The officers looked up and beheld every one of the skylights overhead occupied by a pup reaching over as far as he could get, his mouth open and his tongue hanging out.

"The first lieutenant jumped from his seat. At that moment, as if upon agreed signal, Spottycus slipped from his hold and plunged headlong into the tureen of hot soup. As in duty bound, the others followed his example, and for a while, in the midst of sounds of breaking glassware, the thud and splash of falling bodies, and a prolonged yelping, squealing, and whining, it fairly rained puppies.

"Their next exploit, a day or two afterward, was to fall overboard together, being led, as usual, by indomitable Spottycus, whose cheerful disregard of consequences was rather appalling. They were rescued from a watery grave and wrapped in hot towels, whence they escaped, only to eat a lot of poisoned fly-paper. They became deathly sick, of course, and all that night had to be attended to by two of the officers and most of the crew.

* * * *

"Shortly after the Civil War, one of our steam-frigates visited the port of Rio de Janeiro. Her commander had a parrot of which he was inordinately fond.

"Every morning after quarters Polly would be brought into the cabin and the 'old man' would talk to it and smooth its feathers.

"Six months' confinement on board ship began to tell on the bird's health, so one day it was suggested to the commanding officer that a trip ashore, where it could fly around the trees and eat its accustomed juicy shoots and buds, might tone up its energies. The proposition being favorably received, preparations were made for the parrot's journey. It was put in a cage, which was enveloped in a rough sack, and the whole confided to the care of the commander's cabin steward.

"Now, it appears that the steward, rather aggressive and insolent, was anything but popular with the men; so when he tried to get into the boat, which was to carry him and a lot of liberty men to the shore, no one offered to lend a hand in helping him with the parrot.

"There was a heavy swell on at the time; the steward did not jump at the right moment, he missed his footing,

reached out his open hands to save himself from falling, and, with a last feeble, despairing squawk, Polly, the bag, and the cage disappeared beneath the boisterous waves.

"Next morning the commanding officer said to the steward:

"'How is Polly getting on?'

"'Fine, sir,' replied the mendacious steward. 'She enjoys every minute of the time an' she's getting fat already.'

"Substantially the same conversation occurred between the commanding officer and his steward every day for a week, and at the end of that time the 'old man' declared that the bird must return. In vain did the steward argue that she was doing so well that it was a pity to remove her. The commander, however, insisted that he was anxious to have her again.

"This put the steward in an awful plight. The man remembered that the commander had said that he valued Polly more than a dozen thick-headed stewards.

"At last an idea entered the head of the perfidious steward. He went ashore and procured from a bird-fancier a parrot and cage that closely resembled those he had lost. He returned in good time with his purchase, and took it into the cabin the next day.

"The commanding officer was overjoyed to see his Roman-beaked friend once more, and at once began to overwhelm it with endearing epithets, but in place of its usual ready flow of conversation the bird maintained an impassive silence. Just as the 'old man' was beginning to fear that it had caught cold and lost its voice, the bird ruffled up its feathers, made its eyes very red, and began a long and profane harangue in fluent Portuguese.

"The commanding officer, in a high state of excitement, at once sent for his first lieutenant.

"'Look here, Mr. Bolles,' said he, when that officer arrived, 'didn't I tell you that this was the most remarkable bird alive? It has been ashore only a week, and it has learned to talk Portuguese like a native!'

"The truth came out later, and it went very hard with the steward."

Far up in the mountains of Ceylon there is a spider that spins a web like bright yellowish silk, the central net of which is five feet in diameter, while the supporting lines, or guys, as they are called, measure sometimes ten or twelve feet. Riding quickly in the early morning, you may dash right into it, the stout threads twining round your face like a lace veil, while, as the creature who has woven it takes up his position in the middle, he generally catches you right on the nose, and, though he seldom bites or stings, the contact of his large body and long legs is anything but pleasant. If you forget yourself and try to catch him, bite he will, and, though not venomous, his jaws are as powerful as a bird's beak, and you are not likely to forget the encounter.

The bodies of these spiders are very handsomely decorated, being bright gold or scarlet underneath, while the upper part is covered with the most delicate slate-colored fur. So strong are the webs, that birds the size of larks are frequently caught therein, and even the small but powerful scaly lizard falls a victim. A writer says that he has often sat and watched the yellow monster—measuring, when waiting for his prey, with his legs stretched out, fully six inches—striding across the middle of the net, and noted the rapid manner in which he winds his stout threads round the unfortunate captive.

He usually throws the coils about the head until the wretched victim is first blinded and then choked. In many unfrequented dark nooks of the jungle you come across most perfect skeletons of small birds caught in these terrible snares.

When the Australian aborigine, or black fellow, is pushed and can find no other game, he catches lizards, snakes, iguanas, and kangaroo rats, the wiliest and most agile of all wild animals, on their own ground, and amid surroundings favorable to their concealment, by simply exercising the faculties of a superior wild animal.

With those wonderful brown eyes of his, he can see the faintest trail where a snake had zigzagged through the dry moss and leaves, or the slightest footmark where an iguana had fled from his approach to its refuge in a hollow tree. When daylight fails him, and the dews of evening begin to fall, his broad nostrils take up the chase, and, stooping down among the bushes, with a tough forked stick in his hand to support him in his tiring attitude, he follows the track as unerringly as any bloodhound.

When he runs a snake to earth, if he cannot surprise it in the open and kill it by a sudden blow of his stick, he squats over its hole, holding the forked end of his stick downward, and makes a low hissing or whistling sound with his lips.

Soon the snake puts his head out of the hole and peers round. In an instant the forked stick descends and fixes it to the ground by the neck, and the black fellow, seizing it firmly with his muscular hands just behind the head, so that it cannot bite him, drags it out of the hole and twists its head off; or, if it is too strong for that, pounds it on the ground till its back is broken.

So with the iguanas and all the other animals. The black fellow never loses their trail when once he gets upon it, and, having followed them to their lair, he patiently awaits until they come out, or until he is able to get a hand in and pull them out.

The black fellows declare, and probably with truth, that not a single animal can escape them, if they have time to hunt a piece of desert country thoroughly. When they want to return to camp, they can follow their own trail by sight with the greatest ease, but they say they cannot follow their own trail by scent at all. It has no scent for them, though another man's has strong scent.

This is one of the most curious facts connected with these strange people; but it is only in accord with well-known natural phenomena.

The most singular of all the modes of catching fish in China is that of training and employing a large species of cormorant for this purpose, generally called the fishing-cormorant. These are certainly wonderful birds. The first time I saw them was on a canal a few miles from Ning-po. There were two small boats, containing one man and about ten or twelve birds in each. The birds were standing perched on the sides of the little boat, and apparently had

just arrived at the fishing-ground and were about to commence operations. They were ordered out of the boats by their masters, scattered themselves over the canal, and began to look for fish. They have a beautiful sea-green eye, and, quick as lightning, they see and dive upon the finny tribe, which, once caught in the sharp, notched bill of the bird, never by any possibility can escape. The cormorant now rises to the surface, with the fish in its bill, and the moment he is seen by the Chinaman, he is called back to the boat. As docile as a dog, he swims after his master, and allows himself to be pulled into the boat, where he disgorges his prey, and again resumes his labors. And what is more wonderful still, if one of the cormorants gets hold of a fish of a large size, so large that he would have some difficulty in taking it into the boat, some of the others, seeing his dilemma, hasten to his assistance, and with their united efforts capture the fish and haul it off to the boat.

Fish have many times been taught to perform tricks, and it would appear as if they had much more intelligence than is attributed to them. A gentleman we know once had two brook-trout in a small aquarium in his private residence that would jump out of the water and take flies held between the forefinger and thumb, and would also ring a little bell when they required food. They would also leap over little bars of wood placed about two inches above the surface of the water. It was a very simple matter to teach the fish these tricks. At first a little tower, containing a tiny, sweet-toned silver bell, was fastened to the ironwork of the aquarium, with a piece of string attached to the tongue of the bell extending into the water where the trout were. On the loose end of the string an insect or other tempting morsel was placed, which the fish would at once seize, and, pulling the cord, the bell in the tower would naturally tinkle. After this had been repeated several days, the fish were left without food for some little time, until they made the discovery that they could obtain it by pulling at the string to which the delicacies had been attached. This they never failed to do ever afterward when they were hungry; and as that was nearly all the time, the little bell was constantly tinkling, as the fish were continually pulling the cord, and it was quite a pretty and novel sight.

"THAT BOY OF JACK'S."

BY A. L. SMART.

When mining at the Gulch gave out, the worst part of the population departed for more congenial diggings, and their place was filled by a better class of people.

A few of the old residents remained, however, and among them Jack Bolton, who stuck with dogged perseverance to his claim, satisfied, apparently, if it yielded dust enough to keep him plentifully supplied with whisky and the bare necessaries of life.

The first snow-storm of the season had set in, and Jack was wending his way down from his shanty, near the bend of the Gulch, to his favorite resort, the "Red Trout" Saloon, when, on passing the half-open door of a cabin on the trail, he heard the sound of a child's voice sobbing and crying pitifully.

He halted a moment, then muttering "Bid Flyn's thrashing the boy ag'in!" he pushed the door wide open, and looked in.

On a rough bunk in a corner of the cabin lay a woman's form, half-covered with a ragged blanket, and beside it knelt a tawny-headed boy some five or six years of age, with white, scared face, moaning and crying, and fondling one of the woman's hands in both his own.

"What's the matter, Bud?" asked Jack, in gruff, but not unkindly, tones. "Is the old woman drunk?"

"N—no," sobbed the child; "she ain't drunk now—she's dead, she is."

"Dead!" exclaimed Jack, striding up to the bunk and looking at the woman's face.

Yes, Bid Flyn was dead, and near her, on the floor, lay the cause of both her miserable death and the misery and degradation of her life—a half-emptied whisky-bottle.

As Jack's glance took in the loathsome surroundings, and rested at last on the child, his own past life suddenly stood up before him with a vivid hideousness that shocked him, and, turning his face away, he said, in softer tones than he had used for years:

"Come, Bud; you must go home with me to-night. We'll send some one over to take care of her."

An instant the child gazed in the man's face; then, without a word, arose and took his outstretched hand.

The two went out, and Jack closed the door softly on the awful presence behind them.

Historians in all ages have noted the apparent insignificance of events which have turned the destiny of nations, and the whole current of human life; and the incident just recorded was the turning-point in Jack Bolton's hitherto worthless existence.

Next day Biddy Flyn's mortal remains were laid in the little graveyard on the hillside.

The child was the only mourner, and as the little crowd—whose presence was due to necessity rather than to choice—were about to return to camp, one of them propounded the rather startling question:

"What's to become of the boy?"

"I've thought of that," said Jack, taking the child's hand. "I'm goin' to adopt him, gentlemen, if you'll give me your attention."

Then, raising his hat from his head with one hand, he placed the other on the boy's head, and said solemnly:

"I, Jack Bolton, do hereby adopt this child, Bud Flyn, to be my lawful son, until death do us part!"

And in the silence which followed this novel but impressive ceremony, Jack and "Jack's protégé," as he was ever afterward known in the camp, started off to their cabin.

Time passed, and gradually a change was noticeable in Jack Bolton.

He drank no more, but worked on his claim steadily, until it began to be whispered that he had struck a new pay-streak, and was piling up the dust by the peck; and once, after he came back from a trip down in the valley, it came out that he had left behind him at the bank, for safe-keeping, the biggest nugget that had ever been taken out of Telegraph Gulch, and as much more fine gold besides.

Jack kept his own counsel, and had nothing to say to any but his protégé, Bud, who had grown into a strong, healthy boy of eight.

"Never mind, Bud, what they think," said Jack one day. "We know an' they don't. We don't want 'em to know, either, an', if they ask you questions, jest shake your head an' say nothin'."

"I'll tell 'em it ain't so, dad, if they ask me about the nugget."

"What's that?" said Jack, straightening up. "Do you mean you'd *lie* about it?"

"Well, what of it?" asked the boy, looking him fearlessly in the face. "They ain't no right to know."

"See, here, Bud," said Jack, throwing down his shovel and taking a seat on the bank beside the boy, "a liar's worse than a thief."

"Why?" asked Bud.

"Because," answered Jack, in his most impressive tone and manner, "a liar is always a coward, an' a coward's the most contemptible thing on earth. Don't you never tell no lies, Bud, as long as you want to be my boy. Always remember *that*. A liar's always a coward, an' I won't have no coward for *my* boy."

"All right, dad," said Bud, "I'll remember that."

And Jack went back to work and thought no more about it.

Autumn had come, and there was an unusual quantity of water in the Gulch.

Jack Bolton, in order to take advantage of this fact, had postponed his trip to the valley, with the contents of several shot-bags, although the fact that those same bags were growing so numerous and heavy with the results of his industry made him feel a little uneasy sometimes to leave them in his shanty unguarded.

One night he left work earlier than usual, and, as he came in sight of a big cedar-tree, about half-way down to the cabin, he was surprised to see no sign of the boy, for this was the place Bud usually waited to meet him on the road home.

Presently, when he reached the tree, he saw something which caused him to halt.

The body of Benny Rogers, one of the most respectable inhabitants of the Gulch, was lying on the ground beneath the tree, a gaping wound in his head, from which the warm blood was still flowing, and which had evidently been inflicted with a small ax lying close by.

Near by, also, lay a cocked rifle, the muzzle pointed up the trail in the direction of Jack's claim.

Jack soon satisfied himself the man was dead, and went straight on to the camp, where he notified some of the friends of the dead man of what he had seen.

A crowd of them were soon on the way to the spot, and in a short time returned to the camp with the body.

Jack, standing at the door of his cabin as they passed, noticed that not one of them looked toward him, or spoke a word, and wondered at it.

Bud turned white at the sight, and ducked back into the cabin.

Jack wondered still more when, about an hour later, he saw the same crowd of men coming slowly up the slope toward his shanty.

In a few moments the men had halted in front of Jack's door, and one of them, stepping forward, said:

"Jack Bolton, step out here an' give us a hearin'."

"A hearin'?" repeated Jack. "What do you want a hearin' about?" and he stepped out, to be instantly surrounded; then his hands were tied, and a rope was thrown around his neck.

"What does all this mean?" asked Jack fiercely, when he had recovered somewhat from his surprise.

"First, tell us if you know this tool," said the leader of the men, holding out a small ax smeared with blood, which Jack remembered to have seen lying by Benny Rogers' body under the big cedar.

Jack looked at the instrument closely now, turned a shade paler, and answered:

"Know it? Of course I do. It's mine. There ain't another one like it in the camp, for I bought it down at the settlement for the boy to use."

"Jack Bolton," resumed the leader, "this is the tool that killed Benny Rogers; you own it's yours. Mebbe you can tell us who used it last?"

"I can't tell you that," answered Jack, "for I don't know."

"We believe you do know, and we believe it was you. We'll give you three minutes to say your prayers afore we hang you."

At that instant a shrill cry sounded on the air; then little Bud sprang from the cabin door and bounded down and into the very center of the group.

His breast heaved and his face was white, but his little form was erect, his eyes glowed, and his hands were tightly clenched.

"Dad didn't do it!" he cried, glancing fearlessly around him. "It was *me!*"

A murmur of incredulity and surprise ran around the circle.

"You! How could *you* do it?" demanded Jack, in astonishment.

"I'll tell you how it was, dad," answered the boy. "You know when I went up to the big tree to meet you last night. I spied a big knot of gum jest out of reach. So when I went up to-night early, I took the ax with me to chop off the gum.

"When I got to the tree I looked up the trail, and see you wasn't comin' yet, so I jest clumb up to the first limb with the ax in my hand.

"After I got the gum I set there a-lookin' at it a minute, and then, when I looked up again, I see Benny Rogers a-comin' along up the trail, with a rifle. So I jest kept quiet, an' he sneaked up under the tree.

"Pretty soon I see him go down on his knees careful, an' cock his rifle, an' aim it up the trail; an' I looked that way, too, an' see you comin' along down.

"An', somehow, I knew it was you he was a-goin' to shoot, so I jest dropped down behind him, an' afore he could turn round, I hit him a clip with the ax on his head, as hard as I could, an' he tumbled over.

"Then, when I see the blood runnin', I forgot you was a-comin', an' jest dropped the ax and run for the cabin.

"I was a-goin' to tell you when you came, but you went on down to camp, an' then I thought I'd let 'em find it out themselves.

"That's all, dad, an' now they can hang me up if they want to; but I ain't no liar, am I, dad; nor no coward, either?"

A moment's hush ensued, then a hurried consultation, and, a few minutes later, Jack Bolton was a free man again.

And, after every one of the would-be executioners had shaken hands with that boy of Jack's, Jack caught the boy up in his great arms, and, as he carried him off to the cabin, he whispered:

"Bud, you're the truest, bravest boy that ever lived."

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